WESTERN Adventures

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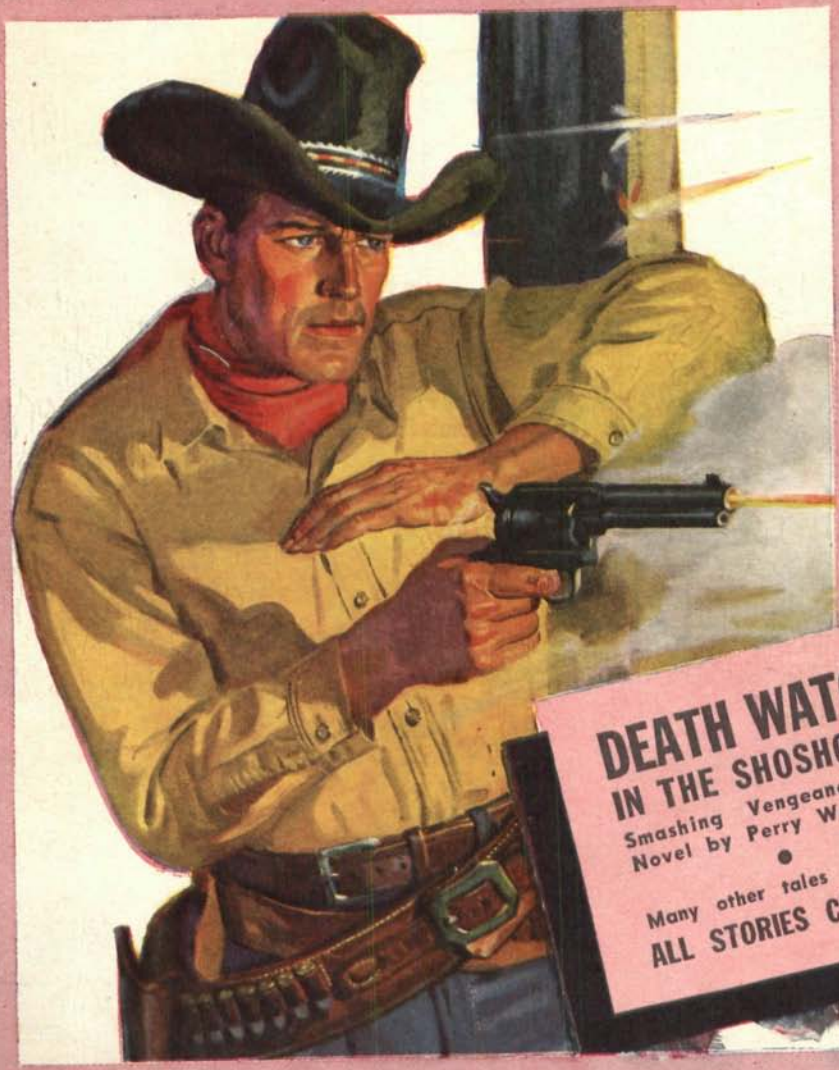

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WESTERN Adventures

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All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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The Home Corral

HERE'S a letter from Phil Seabury of San Francisco which raises some interesting questions:

I wonder if you would come to the rescue of a fellow and help him win a bet? I got into an argument with a friend of mine over how some Western words got started and the one of us who is wrong will be stuck with a bill for dinner and a show.

Right here let me say that Western Adventures is a bang-up Western book with stories that really move and at the same time have a lot more to them than just a lot of shooting. My pal and I started with the first issue and we'll be looking forward to every one that comes out.

So we know the meaning of almost all Western words, but this bet is over how they got started. We narrowed the bet down to four common words and agreed to ask you to be the judge. Will you tell me how the following four words got started in the West: Cowpuncher, Bronc, Maverick, Rustler?

At first, Phil, a cowpuncher was a hand—not necessarily a cowboy—who prodded cattle into a stock car with a pole. In time the term became commonly applied to all men who worked cows in any way. Bronc is a contraction of the Spanish word *broncho* which means rough—and that, we think, is an apt meaning.

Now for "maverick." One Samuel Maverick owned a spread in Texas back in the early days. He sold his spread and stock, among which were many unbranded cows. The new owner covered considerable territory and every unbranded cow he came upon, he claimed it was a "Maverick" and soon the word was used to apply to all unbranded cattle.

"Rustle" was a word commonly used in the West in this way: a man would "rustle up some grub" or "rustle a herd of cows to the corral." Since cow thieves sure had to do some tall rustling to escape a hang rope, they eventually came to be called rustlers.

Since we don't know who bet how, we don't know who wins the argument, but that's how the four words came into being.

There's no room for argument in this nice letter from Miss Eileen McCleary of Staten Island, New York. Here's what she has to say about Western Adventures:

I just finished reading Western Adventures and I think it's a dandy magazine. I'm glad all the stories are complete because lots of times I start a serial in a magazine and then if I don't get the next issue I never know how the story came out.

My favorite story in this issue was LEAD POISONING FOR A SILVER SYNDICATE by Rolland Lynch. I guess the reason why I liked it so much was because it was so unusual and exciting. When I read a long story I'm always glad if there's a girl character and I guess I liked Deborah almost as much as Steve. She was such a good sport.

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At the end of this story I noticed a box that said you could get the next issue of Western Adventures on December 4th and I think that's an awfully long time to wait. Even though I have plenty of home work to do, I still have time to read quite a few magazines and I'd like to be able to buy Western Adventures more often.

Lots of others liked LEAD POISONING FOR A SILVER SYNDICATE, Eileen. So if you'll turn to page 103 of this issue, you'll find BRONCBUSTER'S LUCK, another exciting story by Rolland Lynch.

We thought you'd like to know something about this first-rate author, so we asked him for a bit of a biography. Now we know why he can write such sizzling yarns. But he can tell it better than we can, so here's what Rolland Lynch has to say about himself:

"Born in Peoria, Illinois, but became a Californian at the age of fourteen. Was baseball and basketball letterman during high school, and also boxed on the Los Angeles Athletic Club team, and just missed going to the 1924 Olympics at Amsterdam by a clean knockout. Upon leaving school, made my family's home more or less a base of supplies. Got a job with the Postal Telegraph, and grunted and hiked sticks throughout southern California, Arizona and New Mexico.

"Mingled that with a little professional baseball and boxing. Construction work followed, and then a yen to go to sea. Didn't quit salt water until I'd run out of countries with seacoasts. Was nearly shanghaied out of Battery Park, New York City, but got away in time to miss eight months of fever up the Belgian Congo River. However, made several trips there on better shipping lines.

"Upon returning to the *beach*, didn't have enough salt water, so took to swimming, and became captain of the lifeguards at Seal Beach, California. Have a record there of three years without loss of a life.

"Injured during a rescue, I caught on with a small-town newspaper as its sports editor. Graduated *down town* and became assistant sports editor of the old Los Angeles *Record* when it was really a newspaper. Even the name of it is gone now.

"Bowed out of that to go north and enter the entertainment field. Led a big band, and master-of-ceremonied some of the largest shows in some of the biggest night clubs in the Northwest.

"Upon returning home, was offered a job ghosting for a prominent writer of today, and was with him nearly a year. This proved to be the best move I had made as yet. I learned plenty of writing tricks, and the fact that scribbling was one of the hardest ways in the world to make a living. Went out and learned all I could about ranch life, so I could report authentically, and in the doing became a pretty good rider and fancy roper.

"Then the two greatest events in my life came along. I got a wife, and made my first story sale under my own name. I still travel the deserts and plains, but have resorted to books for my foreign wanderings. Soon as all the trouble irons out, my wife and I hope to make our North Hollywood home our main base of supplies.

"Right now I have two pictures on the screens throughout the country, with prospects of more. Am steadily working toward better stories and better writing; which I'm sure will take up the rest of my life."

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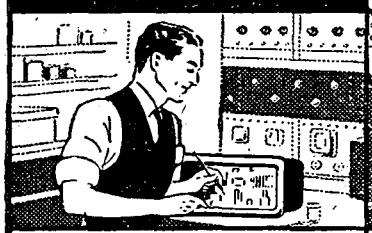
I Jumped My Pay from $18 to $50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

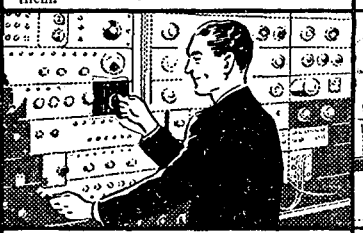
by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory." He'd probably be there today if he hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them.

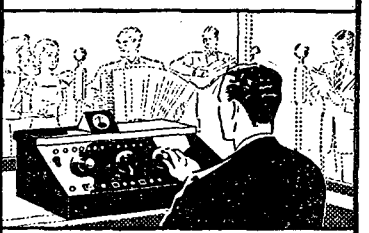
"The training National Radio Institute gave me was so practical I was soon ready to make $5 to $10 a week in spare time servicing Radio sets."



"When I finished training I accepted a job as Radio serviceman. In three weeks I was made service manager at $40 to $50 a week, more than twice my shoe factory pay."



"Eight months later N.R.I. Graduate Service Department sent me to Station KWCR where I became Radio Operator. Now I am Radio Engineer at Station WSUI and connected with Television Station W9XK."



"N.R.I. training took me out of a low-pay shoe factory job and put me into Radio at good pay. Radio has enjoyed a colorful past. It will enjoy an even greater future."

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Death Watch IN THE SHOSHONES

In the Starlight Saloon the smoldering trouble between cattlemen and lumbermen exploded savagely into the open!

BY PERRY WESTWOOD

Blasted by feud fury, the Shoshones had become a blistering battleground for warring factions until a dauntless lawman made peace talk with smoking sixes.

THE three big freight outfits rolled a ponderous, creaking way down the lone street of Eagleville and came to a halt before the Starlight Saloon. Mules, wagons and drivers were thickly coated with dust. The drivers, dropping stiffly down from their high boxes, beat their clothes to re-

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move some of the gray trail dirt, then headed into the Starlight for a much-needed drink.

Standing in the doorway of his office across the street, Sheriff Jim Rideout eyed the wagons musingly, then let his glance run over to a group of saddle broncs tied at the Starlight's hitch rail. He spoke quietly over his shoulder.

"Better get over to the Starlight, Drift. Three more of the lumber outfit's freighters just rolled in and the skinners have gone into the Starlight. Stinger Yates, Shad Gustine, and three or four other punchers are in there, too—have been, in fact, for the past hour or two. That means they may be liquored up some. All of which, plus the way the feeling has been running lately between the cattlemen and the lumber crowd, could spell a lot of trouble. Yeah, you better get over there, just in case."

Drift Delaware, Rideout's deputy, stepped past the young sheriff and down the low steps. Drift was lean and wiry, with a dark, thin, rather saturnine face. Feared by many men, he was fully understood by only one, and to that one he gave a deathless fidelity. Drift Delaware would have laid down his life in a second for Jim Rideout.

"It would be sort of a relief to have an excuse to bust a few of these mavericks, Jim," said Drift in his soft, emotionless drawl. "My patience is wearing awful thin. When you can't talk sense into a man, then you have to beat it in to him, I reckon."

Rideout smiled grimly. "We'll keep on talking, Drift, long as we can. There is always a chance that we might be able to—"

He broke off abruptly, for, of a sudden, echoing from the Starlight, came the thud of a gunshot, a wild, angry yell and then the sound of riotous conflict.

Instantly both sheriff and deputy were racing across the street, but before they could get halfway to the saloon the swinging doors of the place crashed open and a tangle of fighting, cursing men burst into the clear. At the same moment, rolling into the lower end of the street, came a buckboard with a rider jogging along beside it, talking to the two occupants of the rig. Rideout saw neither buckboard nor rider, for his eyes were fixed on the struggling knot of men ahead of him.

For a moment, so tightly tangled were the fighters, it was hard to tell one from the other. Then, in the wider space of the street they spread out slightly and it was possible to pick out individuals. The mule skinners were outnumbered, two to one, but were giving a first-rate account of themselves, particularly a big, rawboned, red-headed fellow whom Shad Gustine and Stinger Yates were after. They closed in on him, swinging and mauling. But the redhead tore loose, set himself, and knocked both his assailants down in two successive punches.

Thinking Gustine and Yates both disposed of, Drift, who was a couple of strides ahead of Rideout, flung himself into the midst of the rest of the brawl, trying to pull fighters apart, shove them back, all the time snapping out his cold order: "Break it up! Break it up!"

But Gustine and Yates were not through, and now, what had been for a moment nothing worse than a rough-and-tumble brawl, was suddenly covered with a cold and deadly shadow, for both of the riders, as they came back from those knock-downs, were dragging at their guns. Gustine flipped his iron high, ready to chop down with a shot.

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THERE was only one way Jim Rideout could stop that shot. He took one more long, leaping stride and laid everything he had into a swinging punch. His fist, backed by all the power of his rush, smashed full on the angle of Gustine's snarling jaw.

Shad Gustine was a powerful, thick-shouldered man, heavy and tough. But the drive of that punch almost lifted him off his feet, and this time, when he hit the dust, he lay there—knocked cold.

Jim went right on over the falling Gustine and drove a charging shoulder into the side of Stinger Yates, leaving his feet in the dive. Yates' gun snarled, just above the sheriff's head. Then they both hit the ground and Jim worried his man savagely, rolling up over him, holding him down, grabbing for the wrist of Yates' gun-carrying hand. He nailed it and twisted ruthlessly. Yates squalled with pain, let go of the gun and drove his free fist up into Jim's face. Jim reared back, hammered his fist home to Yates' jaw and felt the fellow go limp.

Then Jim leaped up and charged in to help Drift with the rest of the melee. But his deputy had pretty well settled matters, except with the craggy, red-headed mule skinner, who seemed to have gone berserk. In his fury, the redhead had taken no notice of the badges Jim and Drift wore, evidently thinking they were just two more riders to be disposed of. At any rate, he whirled, spat a curse and staggered Jim with a flailing punch. Jim shook his head and came back with a smash which made the redhead's knees buckle and quiver, and followed it up with another chunk of thunder that put the big fellow down for good.

Things stopped then, but the ruckus had attracted a lot of attention, and men came running from all over town. It was easy to see that their sympathies were all with the cowboys and against the mule skinners.

"Get these skinners over to the office, Drift," ordered Jim. "Hurry it up before this crowd gets to feeling its oats and a bigger brawl starts."

Drift grabbed the two skinners still on their feet, shook them. "Grab your partner and help him over to the office," he spat. "Hurry up! If this crowd gets started they might try and lynch you."

The skinners needed no other encouragement. They hoisted the groggy redhead to his feet and hustled him across the street, with Drift moving along to protect them. Some of the crowd made as if to follow, but stopped when the deputy turned upon them savagely.

"Git!" he rasped. "Shake along about your business pronto!" His eyes were like little flecks of black fire, and after one look into them the crowd decided to obey.

Jim Rideout was watching Shad Gustine and Stinger Yates crawl slowly and shakily to their feet. Crimson was seeping from Yates' nose, and Gustine spat a mouthful of clotted blood into the dust. The other cowboys stood about, sullen and uncertain.

"Get out of town, all of you," ordered Jim Rideout harshly. "You ought to know I won't stand for any of this kind of rough stuff. Hit leather and travel. And don't come back until you can behave yourselves. I should throw the whole kit and caboodle of you into the cooler."

Gustine glared. "You dirty turncoat!" he blurted thickly. "Cowmen elected you an' now you turn against

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'em an' favor that damned lumber outfit. Before this thing is settled, Rideout, you'll be run out of this county like the coyote you are."

Jim Rideout's eyes were suddenly very cold. "Shut your jaw and get out of town, Gustine. I'm not telling you a third time."

The rider hesitated, cursed and shuffled off, still weaving slightly on his feet. Stinger Yates made as if to speak, decided not to, and followed Gustine. The others, all except one of them, named Bob Arbogast, went along.

"Sorry, Jim," said Arbogast. "Don't know why I mixed in that mess. Must have lost my head. Or it might have been the three drinks I had."

Jim relaxed slightly. "Forget it, Bob. But you'll have to shag along with the rest of those boys."

"I know," nodded Arbogast. "But I wanted you to know."

Jim watched the lot of them until they were clear of town, then went into the Starlight. He was gone but a short minute, then reappeared, heading back for his office. Not until then did he notice the buckboard which had pulled in to the rail before the office, or the rider who had accompanied the rig.

PAT FRAZIER still sat on the buckboard seat, his grizzled head stiffly upright, his blunt features drawn in a scowl. Jim's glance went swiftly past the cowman to the other occupant of the buckboard, a slender girl in khaki blouse and divided skirt, her bared, auburn head shining in the waning afternoon sunlight.

The hard planes of Jim Rideout's lean face were softened as he smiled at the girl. "Hello, Anne," he said. "I didn't know you had a front-row seat to that ruckus. Some of the boys got liquored up a little, and I had to send 'em home to think it over. Howdy, Pat—hello, Mott."

"You make it sound smooth enough, Rideout," said Hugh Mott, leaning forward in his saddle. "But from where I sat, I'd hardly say you played an unbiased game. You give our boys a floater and you take those blasted skinners into your office. What for—to give 'em sympathy?"

Jim Rideout never had been able to stomach Hugh Mott, not from the first moment he had ever laid eyes on the man. He had met Mott four years ago for the first time, when Mott had bought out old Henry Fair's Half Diamond Cross brand. He had met Mott then and shaken hands with him. And despised him. It went that way sometimes. It was something which came up from inside you, something instinctive.

"I settled that row the best way I could, Mott. And for your information, I just asked Micky Shrader who started the fuss. Micky wouldn't lie. Gustine and Yates started it, Mott—deliberately—and the rest of those fool punchers tried to help 'em. Now you know."

"Yeah," growled Frazier. "Now we know. But I still don't like it, Jim. This is cattle country. It was cattle country long before any lumber company ever thought of edging in and spoiling our summer range up in the Shoshone Mountains. You were born and raised to the cattle business yourself. All of your friends are cattlemen—the folks who elected you to your office. It ain't right that you should take sides against 'em."

Jim Rideout shrugged a trifle wearily. "I'm not taking sides for or against anybody, Pat. We've been over all that before. You know where I stand, where I've got to

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stand. The law is impartial; it has to be. When it isn't it's no longer law. It's persecution. I've got to play my hand the way the cards look to me, Pat. Won't you and Anne come in and visit a while? I'll get those skinners out of the office and on their way, now that the crowd has scattered."

"No, thanks," growled the old cattleman stubbornly. "You and me ain't seeing things the same any more."

He urged the buckboard team into movement, turned the rig and headed over to Johnny Whipple's store, farther along the street. Hugh Mott rode after it.

Jim went into his office. The redheaded skinner was hunched in a chair, probing a reluctant forefinger at a swollen jaw. The other two stood beside him, scowling and uneasy. Drift was perched on a corner of the battered old desk.

"Been asking these boys a few questions, Jim," said the deputy. "They claim it wasn't their fault that row started."

"I know," said Jim. "I asked Micky Shrader about that. You fellows can roll your wagons again any time now. Only if you're smart, you'll haul your beer supply along with you from Modoc City and not stop here in Eagleville. Drift and me can't always be handy to drag a pack of cowpunchers off your necks. Though you were doing pretty well for yourselves, at that. Especially you." He grinned at the big redhead.

The redhead grinned back. "You're a white man, sheriff. And you shore pack a hefty wallop in those maulies of yours. No hard feelings?"

"None at all. Good luck, boys."

When they had shuffled out, Jim said: "You better throw a kak on a nag and escort 'em as far as Blue Slides, Drift. I wouldn't put it past Gustine and Yates to be waiting for those fellows somewhere along the road."

CHAPTER II

MISUNDERSTANDING

THE freight outfits, with Drift jogging along ahead of them, had been gone from Eagleville a good half-hour when Anne Frazier slipped out of Johnny Whipple's store and came across to the office. Jim Rideout was smoking a thoughtful, rather moody cigarette, as the girl came through the door. He jumped up and offered her a chair, his face clearing.

"Glad you changed your mind, Anne," he said, boyishly eager. "I need somebody like you around to get my mind off my troubles."

She declined the chair, perching on a corner of the desk and looking at him with a pair of clear, hazel eyes that were unusually intent.

"I want to talk to you, Jim Rideout," she said soberly. "And I warn you in advance that we'll probably quarrel."

"Not me," grinned Jim. "I've had enough fighting for one day. I absorbed a couple of wallops in that ruckus that make my face feel all lopsided. Besides, it takes two to make a fight, and I won't. Not with you, my lovely maid."

"You can leave out the old apple sauce, my friend," Anne said with a coolness that Jim found vaguely disquieting. "I'm in no mood for it. You'd better realize that you're wearing the patience of your friends mighty thin."

"I don't see why I should be," Jim defended himself. "Do you?"

But Anne wasn't to be headed off. "Just how do you feel about the Black Diamond Lumber Co. setting

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up operations in the Shoshones?"

Jim shrugged. "How I feel about it has nothing to do with what you're driving at, Anne. I can only say this: From my point of view, that lumber company has certain rights under the law, same as everybody else. And I intend seeing that those rights are upheld."

A slim, dangling foot began to swing a little faster. "That seems a little bit stuffy and smug."

Jim shook his head slowly. "No, not as I see it. After all, Anne, a man doesn't take an oath of office with his fingers crossed. At least, I didn't."

"We'll move past that angle. How long have you known me, Jim Rideout?"

Jim's eyes took on a musing glint. "Ever since the days of the old Poison Flat school, when you were the belle of the schoolyard and I was just a skinny, scared kid. The reason I never did shine at reading and writing and figuring was because I spent so much time staring at your pigtails. I used to wonder if all fairies wore pigtails."

"Please!" she said crisply. "I'm serious. What I'm driving at is this: Doesn't friendship mean anything to you?"

"I've told you before, Anne, that I rate our friendship as the finest and best thing in my life."

She turned on him quickly. "Then show it, Jim—show it by something more than words."

JIM got to his feet, walked to the door and stood staring out at the street, which was now filled with the glow of sunset. His face had gone taut and grave.

"I was afraid of this," he said somberly. "Anne, I've never asked a favor of you in my life. But I'm asking one now. Don't try and influence me as your father has tried. As he and Newt Cambrian and Mott and Hod Weeks have tried. I'm asking you not to do that."

"And why not?"

He turned and faced her. "Because the answer is—no! From the moment the Black Diamond Lumber Co. started moving into the Shoshone Mountains, your dad and the other cattlemen of this valley have been after me, trying to get me to use my office against the lumber company. They've wanted me to let them block the road so no more freight could get to the lumber camp. They've talked prior right; they've reminded me how I was elected by cattlemen. In other words, they've asked me to make a spineless coward of myself. And, of course, I won't do it. There is one thing no man should be asked to barter away, Anne—his self-respect."

"It can be defined several ways—self-respect, I mean," the girl said, her voice going queerly tight. "I'd say, being true to the trust of one's friends is the best test of self-respect."

"I can't think that you believe that way, Anne; not in your heart," he said quietly. "And if being true to the trust of one's friends means that I have to subjugate my office to serve their ends—why, I reckon I don't want that trust. I'm sorry you said that. It doesn't become you, Anne."

She slid off the desk and faced him, eyes and cheeks bright with anger. "I don't need you to judge what does, or does not become me, Jim Rideout," she flared. "Dad's interests are my interests first, last and all the time."

"Naturally. But it doesn't

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change the fact that you can both be wrong in what you expect of me."

She stamped her foot, a gesture which made Rideout think again of the pigtailed little tyrant who had ruled the schoolyard far back in those older, carefree years.

"Just one more question, Jim Rideout," she said angrily. "Which side do you intend to take, that of your friends, the cattlemen—or of the stranger, the lumber outfit?"

Jim made a weary gesture. "Neither—and both. Did your father send you to try and influence me, Anne?"

"He did not! But I've heard a lot of talk in the past few weeks. And I know dad well enough to read his mind. I came here on my own. I thought, in view of . . . of things you've said to me in the past . . . about how you cared for me, that . . . that you'd be glad to do me a favor. I see now that you . . . you didn't mean anything you said. You've let me down."

Jim flinched, as though an unseen whip had flicked his skin raw. He turned to stare out of the door again.

"For a long time," he said tonelessly, "for a very long time, I've had you up on a pedestal, Anne. I never thought that pedestal would topple over. You're wrong. I haven't let you down, Anne. You've let me down. And it hurts."

She came up behind him. "If you please, Mr. Rideout, I'd like to get through that door." From the tone of her voice she was a million miles away.

Jim stepped aside and let her by. Her slim shoulders and lovely head were very straight as she marched past him. She went, without a backward glance, straight over to where her father sat waiting for her in the buckboard.

IT was well after dark before Drift Delaware got back from Blue Slides, but Jim waited for him, and then they headed over together to Smoky Lake's hash house for supper. Just as they got there, the screen door opened with a bang and a human figure, forcibly ejected, landed at their feet. At the door appeared Smoky Lake, a huge bulk in a soiled white apron, snorting wrathfully and brandishing a pair of fists as big as hams.

"Don't ever show in this place again, Hod Weeks," the big cook yelled. "Else I'll squash you like the dirty little chinch bug that you are. I'll drive you plumb through the floor with a skillet. I will, for a fact!"

Hod Weeks, the ejected man, scrambled painfully to unsteady feet, emphasizing his rage with snarled invectives. Jim caught him by the arm.

"What's going on here?" he demanded sharply. "Smoky, I'm ashamed of you."

"You needn't be," snorted the wrathful Smoky. "I warned that juniper three times to button his lip or I'd throw him out. He wouldn't—so I did. And I'll do it again, by gummy, next time he sticks his weasel face in here."

Weeks had his wits working again. "Arrest that man, Rideout!" he shrilled. "Arrest him, I say!"

"What for?" drawled Jim. "You ain't hurt, are you?"

"Only his feelings, Jim," Drift murmured. "Besides, it ain't breaking no law for a man to throw an objectionable character out of his place of business."

Jim grinned in the darkness. "That's right, Drift. If you don't want to get thrown out of places in the future, Weeks—why, you bet-

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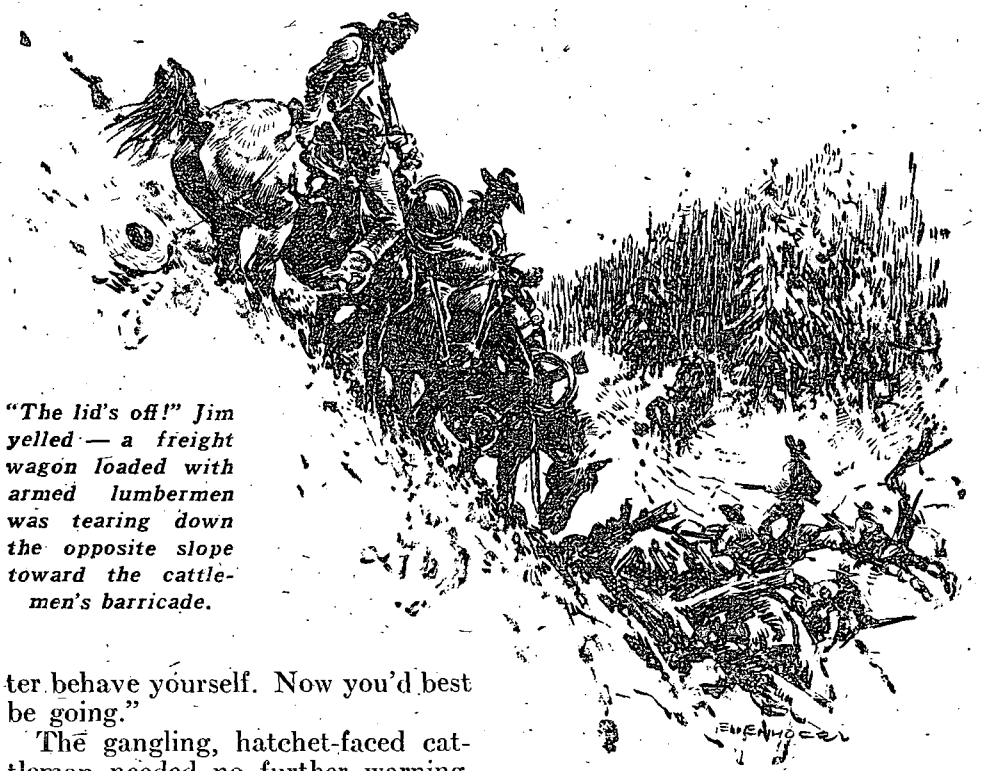

"The lid's off!" Jim yelled — a freight wagon loaded with armed lumbermen was tearing down the opposite slope toward the cattlemen's barricade.

ter behave yourself. Now you'd best be going."

The gangling, hatchet-faced cattleman needed no further warning. He scurried off into the dark, mumbling threats. Jim and Drift went into the restaurant and took a couple of stools at the counter. Smoky faced them, still rumbling wrathfully in his throat.

"You'll pardon me, Mr. Lake, if I'm a wee bit curious as to why you heaped such indignity upon the sacred person of one of our leading cattlemen," Jim said. "As a matter of official business, I'd like to know."

"All right," growled Smoky. "I'll tell you. Weeks was dragging you all around the corral, Jim. Calling you a turncoat and a traitor to your friends. I got a bellyful of that mighty quick! I told him to shut his measly gab, but he wouldn't. So I chucked him out on his ear. And," he added defiantly, "I'll do it again if I have to."

"Smoky Lake," said Jim solemnly, though his eyes were twinkling, "you are a big fat bully—but I love you like a brother. I'll have the usual thing, steak and French fried."

"Same here," chuckled Drift, "and see that it's meat, not boot leather."

FOR the next week, things were quiet enough along the valley. Almost every day freight outfits came rolling down from Modoc City to the north, shuffling their creaking, dusty, heavily laden way through Eagleville and on toward the lumber headquarters in the mountains. Jim Rideout watched them go, while he pondered gloomily over the trials and tribulations of a cow-country sheriff who believed unswervingly in the simple code of the written law and tried to administer it impartially.

On all sides of him he felt the rising forces of opinion. Some of that opinion was on his side, but most

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of it was against him. For, in the last analysis, this was cattle country, steeped in all the tenacious traditions of the cattle industry. And the inevitable hostility toward the invading forces of the Black Diamond Lumber Co. grew stronger by the hour.

Jim combated that rising tide of hostility with every force at his command. He circulated through town and out across the wide miles of the range, talking to this man and that, trying to make them see the inevitable ending of it all, trying to make them realize that they lived in a changing world, a world which needed and demanded other industries besides the one of cattle raising. He tried to make them see that the Black Diamond was fully within the law, that there was plenty of room in the Shoshones for the lumber company and the summer range for the cattle at the same time.

But he found that the theories and suspicions and ideas ingrained by the years were not easily altered. At only one of the four major cattle outfits of the valley was he even received civilly. This was Newt Cambrian's Circle C, but even here the reception was definitely chilly and Jim's arguments useless. At Pat Frazier's Forked Arrow, at Hugh Mott's Half Diamond Cross and Hod Weeks' Rolling W, his reception was distinctly hostile. Mott and Weeks refused to talk to him at all, and Pat Frazier was curt.

The passing days found Jim Rideout growing increasingly grim of face. He smiled less than usual, was given to long silences. So changed was his demeanor that Drift Delaware and Smoky Lake remarked on it one evening when the deputy went in to eat supper alone.

"It ain't just worry over the hell building up between the cattlemen and the lumber outfit," asserted Smoky. "The way that Anne Frazier is acting is working on old Jim, too. I may be only a fat old hash slinger, but I got good eyes and some savvy. Jim sets a heap of store by Anne Frazier. He has for years. And now she's treating him like he was a mangy coyote instead of what he really is—one of the squarest, whitest men who ever wore boot leather. Doggone her pretty little hide, anyhow. She ought to be warmed up with a quirt."

Drift nodded. "She's a big part of Jim's trouble, all right, Smoky. She's tromping on him pretty heavy."

"Look at the way she's been ridin' around with that slickery cuss of a Hugh Mott all the time!" snorted Smoky. "Should be ashamed of herself. Yes, sir, a good, old-fashioned whalin' out behind the woodshed would do that young lady a heap of good. And me, I'd enjoy using the switch."

"I'm going to tell her a few things one of these days," declared Drift. "Jim won't say a word, of course. But I will, by gollies. I'll tell her a few truths about herself and that ornery old bull bat of a father of hers that will make her hair stand on end. Because, when anybody hurts Jim Rideout, they hurt me. And when I'm hurt, I hit back, regardless."

Smoky bobbed his head. "Me, too, Drift—me, too!"

AND then one day, shortly after noon, young Bud Shrader, Micky Shrader's thirteen-year-old boy, came tearing into town astride his old, staid pony, keeping the aged animal to a heavy gallop by dint of a whipping rein end and the steady tattoo of bare heels against gaunt flanks. Bud had an old .22 rifle in

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one hand, and such was his excitement he dropped it in the dust of the street and left it there when he dismounted in front of Jim Rideout's office and hurtled up the steps.

Jim was there alone, Drift being down at the livery barn repairing a weakened cinch on his pet saddle. Jim looked up at the freckled youngster's abrupt entrance. "Sheriff," gulped the boy. "Sheriff—they're gonna fight! They're all set to go. Honest—I saw 'em. They're gonna fight!"

"Whoa!" said Jim. "Let's get this straight, Bud. Who's going to fight—and where?"

With many gulps and a great deal of excited panting, the boy got the story out. It seemed he had gone off in the foothills to hunt jackrabbits. He had gotten far enough south to look down on Blue Slides. A barricade had been thrown across the road and cowboys with rifles were backing it up. Several freight outfits which had rolled through town that morning were stalled. And there was a force of men from the lumber headquarters coming down out of the hills determined to open the road again.

Long before the boy finished, Jim had stood up, reached down belt and guns from a wall peg and buckled them on. Still listening, He got a couple of scabbarded Winchester rifles from a corner closet and broke open several boxes of ammunition on the desk. When the boy stopped, out of breath, Jim asked a curt question.

"What cattlemen were there, Bud?"

"All of 'em, sheriff. Hod Weeks, Newt Cambrian, Hugh Mott and Pat Frazier. He came up in his buckboard just before I pulled a sneak and come in to tell you. He had Anne with him, too. And Stinger Yates and Shad Gustine and Jerk Losey—*they* were struttin' up and down, darin' the mule skinners off the wagons to try and break through. You better hurry, sheriff."

"I'm going to, Bud. Skin down to the livery barn and tell Drift to saddle up a pair of fast broncs. You'll be needing more .22s for that rifle of yours to keep the rabbit crop down. Get yourself some." And Jim spun a dollar across the desk.

The boy's eyes shone as he clutched the coin. Then he was speeding away on bare, padding feet.

Well, it had come—the first really open break—and there was no telling where it would end. Either way, Jim decided, he'd have to play his hand through with the cards he held. A man could do no more. He was waiting before the office when Drift raced up, leading a saddled mount.

Jim and Drift set their fresh, eager broncs to a full-out run, speeding south along the road which followed the river as far as Ten Mile. Here, until the freight wagons had started rolling through, there had been only a trail. But now a road, rutted and dusty, reached as far as Ten Mile, then turned directly west toward the Shoshones, blue and misty in the afternoon haze.

The two riders did not go clear to Ten Mile, but took a short cut into the rolling foothills to the southwest. Mile after mile they sped along, holding their mounts to that speeding run, cutting back farther and farther into the foothills, which began now to be rocky and abrupt, cut through with steep gulches and bulwarked with rim and wall.

Their horses were foaming by the time they rode over a rough-shouldered hogback, to look down into Blue Slides, a long, funneling, upsweeping gulch which offered the only feasible route out of the valley

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proper into the Shoshones. It was the legendary pathway of the valley herds to and from the summer range in the mountains, and the lumber company had been using it as a way in for their freight outfits.

At its narrowest part, Blue Slides was little more than seventy yards across, and at this point a crude but effective barricade of rocks and brush and some old logs had been thrown up. Mounting guard over this were a full dozen cowboys, some sauntering back and forth, some squatting on their heels, others perched on the barricade itself. Every man jack of them had a rifle handy. Their horses were grouped off to one side.

On the lower side of the barricade were five big freight outfits, drawn up one behind the other. At one end of the barricade, drawn up close to it, was a buckboard and team, the seat of the rig empty just now.

ALL these things Jim Rideout took in with swift, measuring glances, and the ruggedness about his mouth and jaw deepened. For the first time in over an hour he spoke, a harsh, impatient note in his voice.

"Drift, I was raised in the tradition of cattle. As far back as I can check, my family were all in that tradition. If I wasn't sheriff of this county, I'd go back to cattle raising. Yet sometimes I can't help but feel that the most childish, most stubborn person in the world is a knot-headed cattleman who gets the idea that his ancient rights are being trampled on. Take that set-up down yonder. You'd expect something like that from a flock of school kids, but never of men old enough to know better."

Drift nodded. "What you aim to do, Jim?"

"Do! Why, I'm aiming to tear that barricade down and let those freight wagons through. Come on!"

"Wait!" Drift said quickly. "Look what's comin' down from up above!"

Jim swung his head. Just breaking out of the lowest fringe of the timber of the mountains came a freight wagon, traveling as fast as its weight and bulk would allow. And it was packed with men—men from the lumber camp, armed with clubs and peavey poles.

"Our first job is to head that crowd off," rapped Jim. "Right now!"

He put his mount over the steep side of the gulch, sliding and leaping down the treacherous slope. A shout came up from the cattle forces at the blockade, but Jim paid them no attention. He reached the bottom of the gulch and spurred up to meet the advancing freight wagon. Two hundred yards above the blockade he met it, holding the center of the road, arm flung high in authority. Brakes squealed and the wagon drew to a halt. The men in it began to yell and gesticulate.

"Stay right here, Drift," Jim ordered. "Keep the road blocked while I go talk to those hombres."

He rode up beside the towering freighter. "Who's leading this gang?" he demanded.

"What difference does it make?" yelled a powerful, bearded fellow. "We're going to show those blasted saddle pounders who's who in this neck of the woods. We'll show 'em they can't go on raising hell with us."

"I'm talking to the leader. Who is he?" Jim said crisply.

A big man with a stubborn jaw and a crisp, graying mustache swung out of the freighter bed and dropped to the ground. It was Mike Custis, superintendent of the lumber outfit.

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Jim had met him before. A deep spark of anger burned in the lumberman's eyes.

"You told me in my first talk with you, Rideout, that you'd see that the lawful rights of my company were upheld," he snapped. "That"—he waved a hand toward the barricade below—"don't look like it. Those cowboys have no right to block off freight from coming in, and I and my men are going to open the road if we have to break a few heads."

"And get yourselves shot all to bits trying it, Custis," said Jim curtly. "Take it easy. I'll see that the road is opened. I just got here myself. Pick half a dozen of your men to do the heavy work and we'll go down there. The rest of your crowd stays here. If there's any fighting to be done, me and my deputy will take care of that. All right, call off your men."

Custis hesitated, his eyes locked with Jim's steely gray glance. Then he shrugged. Turning, he called out a few names and barked the order for the rest of his men to stay with the wagon. The six men designated climbed joyfully down, while the rest put up a howl of disappointed protest. But Custis quieted them and set off down the road, with Jim riding out ahead of him.

"All right, Drift," Jim said crisply. "We go down and open the road."

As they approached the blockade, the lounging cowboys went on the alert. Shad Gustine dropped his rifle over the crook of his arm, the muzzle swinging menacingly.

"Close enough, Rideout," he growled. "We built this blockade to stay put—and it's going to."

Jim's frigid glance ran all along the line. "Put those guns down and get out of here," he ordered coldly.

Gustine cursed and spat. "Like hell!" he snarled. "Keep back!"

"Go get him, Jim," drawled Drift. "I'm watching the rest."

The hovering threat of deadly violence filled the air. Then came a harsh command. "Take it easy, everybody. Gustine—don't take too much for granted."

It was Pat Frazier, coming over from the far end of the barricade. With him were Newt Cambrian, Hugh Mott and Hod Weeks. And over where they had been grouped stood Anne Frazier, her face troubled and anxious.

THE cattlemen climbed the barricade and faced Jim and Drift. "Suppose we let you know just where we stand, Rideout," said Frazier, "before you go barging in and starting something you can't finish. We aim to make this barricade stand up, even if we have to back that stand with lead. We've tried to get you to see the light, but you wouldn't. Now we're going to handle this thing our own way!"

Jim looked down at him with bitter eyes. "This light that you aimed to make me see, Pat, is the light of everything to your own interests, no other. It's outside the law, and you know it. But you're too doggone pigheaded and stubborn to be fair. Now I'll tell you something: You got just one minute to call off your punchers and get on about your business. While I'm packing this star, you or nobody else is going to block an open road. That's turkey. One minute!"

A restless stir ran through all the listeners. Cowboys along the barricade looked at each other with uncertainty. Over where a slim, auburn-haired girl stood, a pair of slender hands were twisted tightly together.

"He's tied in with that blasted

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lumber crowd right up to his neck," squalled Hod Weeks thinly. "He's sold out to them! Don't you back down an inch, Pat!"

"Don't worry, Hod," said Hugh Mott in his cold, sneering way. "I've never backed down before any damned coyote in my life, and I don't intend to start in now."

Something snapped in Jim Rideout. For weeks his patience had been badgered and bedeviled past all endurance. And now this fellow Hugh Mott, whom he had always despised, was cursing him.

Jim left his saddle in a lunging dive. He crashed full into Mott, sending the rancher stumbling to his knees. Jim went down on one knee himself, but he was up and driving forward as Mott struggled erect. Jim hit him, full in the snarling mouth, sending Mott reeling still farther back, where he came up against the logs of the barricade and could give way no farther. And then, with three more blows, two rights and a left, he turned Mott's sneering face into a bloody pulp and dropped him in a limp hulk beside the logs.

Jim swung around, his hands whipping past his hips, to come away bearing blued steel, and his voice rose in a savage, hard yell. "Drop those guns and scatter! All of you! Drop those guns!"

CHAPTER III

DEATH AT BLUE SLIDES

MOST of these men had known Jim Rideout for many years. Several times they had seen him in a fighting mood, but never as he was now. His face was ridged and bleak, his eyes bits of blazing gray fire. In his voice was a note as bitter and savage as the slash of a whip.

Most of the riders dropped their guns. Three didn't. Shad Gustine, Stinger Yates and Jerk Losey. And it was the latter who flipped his rifle up, cocking it with the move, swinging the deadly muzzle toward Jim. Over the sights, Jerk Losey's eyes gleamed with malignant purpose.

Jim shot him through the body, and Losey fell backward off the barricade. As he fell, his rifle snarled, but the slug went wild to waste itself against the wall of the gulch.

Then Jim went at Shad Gustine, dodging under Gustine's swinging rifle barrel, grabbing a handful of his flaring chaps, dragging the cursing cowboy floundering down. Jim clubbed Gustine across the head with his gun.

At the same moment, Drift Delaware, who had followed Jim's berserk charge, got his hands on Stinger Yates, pulled him forward and uppercut him so savagely that Yates' hat flew off his head. When Drift let go of Yates, the fellow collapsed like an empty sack. Then, while Drift ran along the barricade, kicking guns aside, routing the bewildered and disorganized cowboys, Jim Rideout turned and charged back at Pat Frazier, Newt Cambrian and Hod Weeks, who seemed as stunned as anybody else at the sudden, eruptive violence of Jim and his deputy.

"Back over against that far wall of the gulch!" Jim ordered. "You asked for this, all of you. You had to have this lesson, didn't you? You would have it. You were bound to force my hand, weren't you? Well, I'm playing it, right down to the last card. Move! And pack Mott with you. Move, I said!"

Pat Frazier, Newt Cambrian and Hod Weeks had probably never expected to see Jim Rideout as he was

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now. Or maybe they had figured their bluff too strong to be called. At any rate, they were like men half stunned, unable to believe their eyes and ears. They obeyed without a word, lifting Hugh Mott's unconscious figure between them and shuffling away.

Jim, now that the way was clear, turned and sent a harsh call echoing up the gulch. "All right, Custis—bring your men in and knock this barricade to pieces. But keep your mouths shut and work fast."

The brawny lumberjacks made short work of the barricade. The mule-skinners of the five freight outfits were ready, and the big wagons creaked into movement and crawled up the gulch. Jim turned on Custis.

"Take your bully boys and get out of here," he said curtly. "And the next time you're up against something of this kind, don't try to bull it through on your own hook. You come to me and let my office handle it. It's high time some grown-up people around here began to show a grain of sense. I'm sick of the whole crowd of you, all too doggoned stiff-necked to make an attempt at getting along with each other. All right, ramble!"

Came Hod Weeks' shrill complaint. "Ask him about that fence across French Meadows, Rideout. Or maybe you don't care what he builds."

"How about that, Custis?" demanded Jim. "Have you built a fence across French Meadows?"

Custis hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. But—"

"No buts about it," cut in Jim. "Tear it out again. French Meadows is open country. You or nobody else has a right to fence those meadows. Tear it out. I'll be riding up to see that you do."

CUSTIS gathered up his men and headed back to his wagon, which turned and followed the disappearing freight wagons. Jim stared after them for a moment with hard eyes, then turned and walked over to Drift.

"Losey?" he asked wearily.

"Dead," said Drift. "He had it coming, Jim. It was you or him. He had his chance to lay down his guns, same as the rest. He chose to smoke it out—and lost."

"Gustine and Yates?"

"Coming out of it. Sadder, but maybe not wiser. Their kind never seem to learn. What now?"

"Start everybody home. Losey, like Gustine and Yates, was Mott's man. The Half Diamond Cross can take care of him. I still got something to say to Frazier and Cambrian and Weeks."

The three cattlemen stood in a sulky, stubborn-eyed group. Hugh Mott was sitting down, his back against the wall of the gulch. Anne Frazier was down on one knee beside him, dabbing at his bruised and battered features with the end of a neckerchief, wet with water from a canteen. As Jim Rideout came up, she lifted her head and looked at him, her eyes almost crackling with anger. The taut lines of Jim's face deepened a little, and he turned to face Pat Frazier.

"I don't know whether you learned anything today, Pat," he said, the weary note coming back into his voice. "I hope so. I don't enjoy this sort of thing, yet there's no other out for me if you fellows persist in trying to take the law into your own hands. You stand high in influence through the Cold River Valley, Pat. If you'll see sense, the rest will follow you. This world, you know, wasn't made for the express benefit of cattle interests. Nor

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for a lumber company, either. Everybody has certain rights under the law. My job is to see that they enjoy those rights, and that's the way I intend to see things through. There's plenty of room in the Shoshone Mountains for cattle and lumber interests at the same time, without need of a mite of trouble. I'm not playing any favorites, and I'm not taking any sides. If you've got an ounce of savvy you'll go up and see Custis and settle your differences like sensible men, not like a flock of stubborn kids. Then there'll be no more trouble for anybody. How about it?"

There was a note of pleading in Jim Rideout's voice, which, of all the listeners, only Anne Frazier seemed to detect. She looked up at him again, and this time there was not nearly so much anger in her eyes. Instead, there was a shadowed and reluctant sympathy.

Pat Frazier cleared his throat raspingly. "When I need your advice on how to run my business, Rideout, I'll let you know. I'll tell you this much: When you say you didn't take sides today you lie!"

It was as calculated as a slash across the face with a quirt. Jim Rideout went white to the lips. There was hardly anything to be seen of his eyes, so deeply did they seem to draw back into his head. He rocked forward on his toes as though about to leap at the old cattleman. Then, with a queer, strangled sound in his throat, he lunged for his horse, swung into the saddle and spurred away.

Before Drift Delaware followed his chief, he stopped in front of Pat Frazier and looked him up and down with cool contempt. "The biggest coward in this world, Frazier," he said cuttingly, "is a man who uses his age as a shield. Had you been thirty years younger, Jim would have knocked those words right back between your teeth."

Then Drift found his saddle and was gone.

There was a long moment of dead silence. Anne Frazier was up on her feet now, biting at her red lips, staring up at the misty blue bulk of the Shoshone Mountains, but not seeming to see them. Pat Frazier began to mumble to himself. Hugh Mott got to his feet.

"He started the smoke rolling," said Mott in thick fury. "Whatever comes now, he can answer for it."

Pat Frazier's mumbling began to be intelligible. "We elected him and he turned on us. But the hand ain't played out yet. Before we're done with him that damned turncoat will make—"

Anne Frazier turned on her father furiously. "Be still!" she cried. "Both of you. There's been enough name calling, dad. I'm not exactly proud of you, or myself, or . . . or— Come on, we're going home. Now!"

DRIFT DELAWARE sat on the steps of the sheriff's office, whittling. Down street, two chuck wagons had just creaked into town, to stop before Johnny Whipple's general store. Drift recognized the two drivers as they climbed down and went into the store. Swearing softly, he closed his knife with a click, pocketed it and went down to the wagons. One had Pat Frazier's Forked Arrow brand burned in the side of it. The other was marked with New Cambrian's Circle C.

A short, fat, bald-headed man came out of the store, lugging a fifty-pound sack of flour over his shoulder, which he heaved over the tail gate of the Forked Arrow wagon.

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"Hello, Fats," drawled Drift. "I thought the spring roundup was finished weeks ago."

"Was," puffed Fats Wade. "But the old man has decided to shove his herd up on summer range a little early this year."

"Hum!" said Drift. "Circle C going to take their stock in, too, eh?"

"Yep! So's the Half Diamond Cross and the Rolling W. Everybody aims to get their cattle on the summer range before that danged lumber company can gobble up everything."

A sarcastic retort trembled on Drift's lips, but he held it back. Here it was again, that bullheaded, ingrained insistence of the cattle interests on what they chose to call their ancient rights. The right of the open range. Drift's lips curled into a sardonic smile. Open for them, but for nobody else. That came closer to it.

Chuck Wingo, the Circle C cook, came out lugging a sack of beans and several sides of bacon. He hailed Drift good-naturedly and went back into the store for another load of supplies. Drift headed back for the office where Jim Rideout sat behind his desk in morose grimness.

"Fats Wade and Chuck Wingo are down at the store, loading up their chuck wagons," reported Drift. "They say that Frazier, Mott, Cambrian and Weeks are aiming to start driving for the summer range pretty soon. That means they're leaving at least six weeks of good valley range go to seed just so they can kick up a fuss with the lumber company. I dunno what we're going to do with 'em, Jim."

Jim Rideout stirred wearily. He'd been thinking a lot of thoughts which didn't do him any good. About last week, for instance, at the Blue Slide ruckus. About the way Jerk Losey had toppled over, dying with a bullet through his body. And the way Anne Frazier had looked at him—particularly about that.

He had preserved the honor and authority of his star in that row, but he had wondered ever since if it was worth it. What he had gained was pretty intangible, but the thing he had lost was real. Anne Frazier, for instance. There wasn't the least doubt in Jim's mind but that her friendship was something he'd never know again.

Outside sounded the clatter of hoofs. Drift took a look and swore softly. "Here comes Custis, lathering the whey out of his bronc," he announced. "Now what's gone wrong?"

The lumber-company superintendent stamped in, face full of trouble. "Hello, Custis," Jim greeted him. "What is it?"

"We just finished building a trestle across a cut to carry our narrow-gauge railroad," announced the lumberman harshly. "Last night somebody dynamited it. What do you intend to do about it? Remember, you said for me to bring my troubles to you, Rideout."

Jim reached for his hat. "We'll look into it, of course," he said. "Drift, go saddle the broncs."

CHAPTER IV

DYNAMITE DEVILTRY

"I GAVE orders that none of my men were to start clearing up this mess until you'd had a chance to look everything over," said Custis. "So if any sign has been left about, you shouldn't have much trouble finding it."

Jim Rideout nodded absently, staring down into the shallow gulch below. On the left, cutting along the top of a long, sparsely timbered

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Jim piled into Stinger Yates, but the gunman let out a yell loud enough to bring his whole hardcase crew gunning for the two lawmen.

ridge which ran to the northwest, twin ribbons of narrow-gauge steel tracks swept up in a long, graceful curve to the brink of the gulch. Then it seemed that some giant hand had seized them and twisted them in a mad convulsion of strength, afterward throwing them aside as useless.

The gulch was choked with tangled, splintered timbers, blackened and pulped by the force of the explosion. A pitch pocket in one of them, ignited by that same explosion, still smoldered, sending up a thin column of pungent smoke. On the far edge of the gulch, the rails stretched their orderly way on along the ridge toward a dense blanket of timber which brooded, blue and misty, in the distance.

Jim dismounted. "All right, Drift," he said. "Come on."

They slid down the steep bank of the gulch and moved up to the jumbled mass of destruction. Whoever had set off the blast had done a complete job. Foundation, shoring, braces—all was torn asunder.

"Looks like three charges were

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set," drawled Drift. "One at each end and one in the middle. We're not going to find much here, Jim."

"Maybe not right here, Drift. But they had to come in some way. They didn't fly. You cross over and look along the gulch on the far side. I'll take a look at this end."

Slowly and carefully, Jim Rideout began weaving back and forth across the gulch, working out from where the trestle had stood. Scattered timbers still cluttered things up for a good fifty yards distant.

YARD by yard, Jim studied the earth, back and forth, banks and bottom. He found nothing. Then he heard Drift yell. So he went back, climbed out of the gulch, crossed to Drift's end and dropped back in again. The deputy stood right at the edge of the tangled timbers, staring at the ground.

In building the trestle, the lumber workers had done some digging to set some foundation sills. Earth that they had thrown aside had not yet had time to harden and set. And here, in a small patch of that earth was a boot print.

"They came in from this end, looks like," said Drift, a quiver of exultation in his voice. "And one of them stepped there."

The mark was made by a riding boot, narrow and pointed, the heel mark deep and sharp and sloping. There was a faint marking where the center of the sole had rested, and by getting low to the ground and looking from an angle so the shadow would lift slightly, Jim identified the marking.

"A Star boot," he announced. "Which doesn't mean a thing, because nine tenths of the riders in the valley wear Star boots. Still, there *is* something here that might pan out, Drift. Those boots were new, or nearly so. Sole and heel cut clear and sharp, so the heel can't be run over in any way. Yeah, those boots haven't been worn very long. And if riders came in from this way, they must have left their broncs somewhere west of here. We'll check up on that later."

They searched that west end of the gulch thoroughly, but here the earth was rocky and hard, and drifted banks of pine needles made cushions on which no sign remained.

"Bronc sign is about all that's left to look for, I reckon," said Drift finally. "How about it?"

Jim nodded. "We'll get our horses and ride some circles."

Custis had been waiting with the horses. "Well?" he demanded. "How about it?"

Jim Rideout shrugged. "A little something. Not much, but a little."

"I'm preferring charges, of course, if you get 'em," Custis declared.

"I expect and want you to," said Jim quietly. "By the way, how about that fence across French Meadows, Custis? Got that torn out yet?"

"Not yet," Custis admitted, "but I'll have it done if you can show me that your office packs enough authority to protect the interests of my company, Rideout. Get me right. I don't want any trouble with anybody if it can be avoided. But I'm a little sour on cattlemen. I had one deal with them that taught me something. I ran into a set-up something like this before.

"I set up a mill back in the Corsair Mountains up in the northern end of the State. Cattle interests thereabouts began yowling about their precious summer range. I tried to laugh 'em off, but it didn't work. They set fire to a twenty-thousand-dollar mill and burned it to the ground on me. That lesson took:

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That's why I had that fence thrown across French Meadows first thing. That fence will keep any cattle from drifting in too close to where my new mill is going up here in the Shoshones. And with cattle kept from getting too close to the mill, these cussed saddle pounders will have no excuse for trespassing around valuable property. I can't, and won't take any chances on this mill being burned. You prove to me that the cattlemen will respect the rights of my company and I'll be glad to yank that fence down. But by the looks of what happened to this trestle, I can't see any sign of that respect."

"I can see your point," nodded Jim. "Still, French Meadows is open country, Custis, and you have no right under the sun to fence it. My office will do all in its power to protect your lawful interests, but it intends doing the same for the cattlemen. I'm playing no favorites. If I can pick up the ones guilty of this trestle job, and I got a hunch I might, they go to jail, regardless of who they are. But if that fence isn't out of French Meadows within the next forty-eight hours, you're going to jail. That's final, Custis."

The lumberman scowled, then smiled grimly. "I can see you mean that, Rideout. All right. I'll have men start on that fence today."

IT was midafternoon when Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware got back to Eagleville. While Drift put the horses up at the livery barn, Jim strode over to Johnny Whipple's store. Whipple, a little, wrinkled, bright-eyed man, was alone, so Jim got right down to business.

"Sell any Star boots lately, Johnny?"

"Sure," bobbed the little storekeeper. "Sure, Jim. Best-selling boot I got. Why?"

"See can you recall who bought 'em in—say—well, the past two months."

Whipple scowled in thought. He gave off several names, and Rideout stored them away in his memory. He tried another question: "Sold any dynamite lately?"

"Nope. Don't sell enough of that any more to hardly bother with. Fact is, I ain't got a bit left. Old Dick Bundsho took the last of it about two weeks ago. I gave him a good price on it just to get rid of it all. Dick is still cracked on the idea that he's going to strike gold one of these days at that prospect of his back on Sulphur Crick."

"I see. If anybody should ask you, Johnny, I haven't been after any information at all."

"Oh! So that's it, eh? Fair enough, sheriff; I don't know a thing."

Outside, Jim met Drift. "We eat, then ride again—to Sulphur Creek," he told his deputy.

Sulphur Creek ran back into the Shoshones about five miles south of Ten Mile Ford. The canyon of the little creek was full of blue and purple shadows when Jim and Drift rode up it to a little flat where a rickety cabin stood. In the hillside behind the cabin loomed the mouth of a small prospect tunnel.

Old Dick Bundsho, a gnarled, leathery chunk of a man, his faded eyes vague with the endless dream of his calling, was chopping wood beside the cabin.

"Hello, Dick," Jim greeted him cordially. "How's the prospect coming?"

"Better," said the old fellow in a patient, childish way. "Looking better all the time, sheriff. I might've hit the lode today if I'd had pow-

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der enough for one more shot."

"How come you ran short of powder? That was tough luck."

"Them danged cowpunchers!" cried the old fellow in sudden, shrill anger. "I told 'em not to take too much, and they nigh on to emptied the box on me."

"Cowpunchers? Now I wonder what cowpunchers would be wanting with giant powder?"

"I dunno. Wasn't interested. They give me five dollars for some, but they didn't have to take it all."

"That's a shame, Dick. If I knew who they were I'd make 'em give it back."

"Will you, sheriff? Say, that's white of you. They was Bull Hunter and Stinger Yates. If you can get my powder back for me I think I can hit that lode. She's in these hills somewhere, and I figure I just about got her tracked down."

"You'll get your powder, Dick," promised Rideout. "I'll have Johnny Whipple get in a box right away. Well, we'll be riding. Hope you strike it rich, old-timer."

"Bull Hunter," murmured Drift as they rode off down creek. "It's perfect, Jim. I've heard Hunter talk about his experiences at mining before he turned to punching cows. He'd know how to handle powder."

"Right. And he was one of the men Johnny Whipple named as having bought new Star boots within the past month. And Stinger Yates. You had one of those sets of bronc tracks we followed back in the hills figured as that chestnut horse he favors."

"Which one do we go after first, Jim?"

"Hunter. The Rolling W is closest."

It was after dark when they reached the Rolling W. Apparently the evening meal had been eaten and the crew gathered in the bunkhouse, for it was the only building on the ranch which showed lights. Jim and Drift dismounted at the corrals and crossed to the bunkhouse, entering without a hail.

A STIR of surprise ran through the long, narrow room. Some of the punchers were lounging on their bunks. A group were gathered about a card table near the door, playing stud. Hod Weeks was one of these, and he started up with a rasp of anger.

"Your nerve reaches to hell and gone, Rideout!" he spat. "You'll get yourself shot, barging into a man's property this way. Don't hang around. I can't think of a thing I want to talk to you about."

Jim ignored the outburst, moving past the card players. "Watch 'em, Drift," he said curtly.

On one bunk was a stocky, heavy-bodied, swarthy-faced rider. Jim stopped beside him.

"Come on, Hunter," he said. "You're under arrest."

The fellow lunged to his feet. "Me? Under arrest?" he snarled. "What is this—a joke?"

"No joke. Give me your gun."

"Take it!" spat Hunter. "This way!"

He lunged a heavy left shoulder hard against Jim's chest, at the same moment snatching for his gun with his right hand. The impact sent the lawman staggering back, but he slid a gun free. He was reluctant to shoot, but it looked as though he would have to. And then, from the bunk next to Hunter, a long arm shot out and a hand grabbed Hunter's gun wrist.

The puncher cursed savagely, tried to yank free. But before he could do it, Jim stepped in and clipped him deftly above the ear

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with a gun barrel. Hunter grunted and went down.

In back of the sheriff, Drift Delaware's voice sounded soft as silk, but with a menacing undertone: "Stay put, everybody! Jim and me are at the end of our patience. From here on out we play rough. Weeks—sit down!"

"Right, Drift," Jim said crisply. "We play rough." Then he added, his tone a trifle milder. "Bob, that was quick thinking. I'd have had to drill him, otherwise. You seem to work good with me. I'm needing another deputy. You're it if you want the job."

Bob Arbogast slid off his bunk, dragged his war bag from under it and began stuffing odds and ends into the catch all.

"You've hired a deputy, Jim," he said. "I've been fed up with this layout for a long time. Be right with you."

By the time Bull Hunter had his senses back, Bob was ready to go. He helped Jim get the dazed puncher to his feet, and between them they hustled the fellow out into the night.

"Keep 'em put, Drift, until I yell," Jim said over his shoulder.

Hod Weeks was almost foaming with fury. "I'll raise the country against you and Rideout," he threatened hoarsely. "And Arbogast! Next time I meet up with that damned traitor I'll . . . I'll—"

"You'll ride right by like a good little cur, Weeks," cut in Drift softly. "Your screeching don't skin cats. You talk a heap bigger than you fight. An' here's something for you to remember: It ain't in the cards for a couple of cattlemen in this valley to stay dumb and stupid forever. One of these days they'll get their senses back, and when they do, you'll find yourself way out on a long, thin limb. Now shut up before I jam this gun down your throat."

A hail came from outside, and Drift backed to the door. "Don't get rambunctious, any of you," he advised. "It'll be healthier."

He slid away and ran through the darkness. Jim Rideout and Bob Arbogast were mounted and ready and had Bull Hunter tied in the saddle of a horse. Drift climbed his own kak, and they sped away into the night.

Jim did not let up on the pace until they reached the river. There he reined in for a moment, handed Bob Arbogast some keys. "Take Hunter straight to town and lock him up, Bob," he ordered. "Then hold the fort until Drift and I get there. We got another little call to make before Weeks can get a rider over there with a warning. Hike!"

Bob, herding his prisoner before him, sped to the north. Jim and Drift turned east, crossing the river and riding up the long slope beyond, and on to the Half Diamond Cross. Here again the bunkhouse was the only building showing light, but this time, as Jim and Drift reached the corrals, a thin, waspish voice sounded, the voice of Stinger Yates: "Who is it? Why all the rush?"

Jim fogged his voice to a deep hoarseness: "Where's Mott? Got a rush message for him."

Yates moved closer to them, away from the heavy shadows of the corral. "Mott's at the Forked Arrow. Seems to have gone plumb loco over that Frazier girl. Spends most of his time—"

His words broke off in a strangled snort of surprise, for Jim had left his saddle like a swooping hawk. His lithe, rock-hard body smashed Yates to the ground, while swift digging fingers found the cowboy's

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throat and cut off the yell of alarm forming there. Drift was only a split second behind his boss, and before Yates was fully aware of just who his assailants were, he was bound and gagged.

"Maybe our luck's changed, Jim," murmured Drift. "This was almost too easy. I'm lighter than you. I'll take him over my saddle."

Silently they moved off into the night, exulting in their good fortune.

CHAPTER V

DRIFT SPEAKS HIS MIND

AGAIN Jim Rideout stood in the door of his office, looking out at the early sunshine of another day. On the steps below him, Drift Delaware and Bob Arbogast were perched side by side. Each of the deputies had a Winchester rifle across his knees. Excitement lay along the street in an invisible current. Riders and townspeople stood in little groups here and there. More riders were coming in with every passing moment. Everybody seemed to be waiting for the arrival of something which would turn the leashed excitement into explosive action.

Bob Arbogast stirred restlessly. "Think they'll try and take 'em away from us, Jim?" he asked.

"They may try, but that will be all," the young sheriff answered tersely. "We'll know when the big moguls show up."

"Here they come now, Jim," murmured Drift. "Looking stiff-necked and proddy."

Pat Frazier, Newt Cambrian, Hod Weeks and Hugh Mott came riding along in a group. There had been a fifth person with them as they entered town, but Jim Rideout caught the flash of sun on an auburn head as Anne Frazier pulled aside and tied her pony at a hitch rail farther down street.

The four cattlemen were greeted by yells from the various groups of riders. "O. K., boss," yelped a voice. "Say the word and we'll tear that danged jail down. Just say the word."

The cattlemen came on and dismounted before the office. Pat Frazier and Newt Cambrian looked more troubled than angry, but both Mott and Weeks were scowling savagely.

"Want a powwow with you, Rideout," Frazier said curtly.

"Sure. Come in, gents."

Jim stood as they filed in, then circled the desk to face them. A group of cowboys starting to approach were ordered back crisply by Drift and Bob Arbogast.

"Last night," growled Frazier, "you hit the Rolling W and arrested Bull Hunter. You must have got Stinger Yates at the Half Diamond Cross, too, for he ain't to be found this morning."

"I got him," nodded Jim. "That's right, I got 'em both."

"Why?"

"Because they dynamited a trestle that the lumber company just finished building."

"You're sure of that?"

"Bull Hunter has confessed his part. Yates tried to lie his way out of it, but he isn't fooling me any."

"And what do you intend doing with them?"

"See that they're prosecuted under the law."

"The devil you will," snarled Hod Weeks. "You turn those boys loose and do it now or we'll give the word to our crews outside. And when they get through, there won't be a stick of your cussed jail left standing. This county is plenty sick of you, Rideout."

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"That's right," asserted Hugh Mott coldly. "It's a final showdown, Rideout. Today your hand gets called—all the way."

JIM RIDEOUT let a remote, icy glance rove over Weeks and Mott, then on to Newt Cambrian and Pat Frazier. "You two feel the same way?" he snapped.

Frazier and Cambrian seemed a little uneasy, hesitating. Jim put his open hands on the desk top and leaned forward, while the ice in his eyes took on a flaming quality.

"Do you?" he repeated, anger crackling in his voice. "Speak up! Come out in the open, you two models of virtue. I want a clear-cut look at you in your true colors. You've been posing around this valley a long time as models of virtue and wisdom. But lately you've been hanging awful close to a pair of dirty whelps who think they can subvert the given law of this country to their own ends. I've recognized the coyote strain in Mott and Weeks a long time ago. Now I'm looking awful close to see if some of the same is seeping out of you. I want to know. I want to know exactly where everybody stands in this showdown.

"Yeah, I got Hunter and Yates locked up. They broke the law wide open in that dynamiting. I arrested them for it. But they didn't think that stunt up on their own. Somebody, one of you four, maybe all of you, put them up to it. When I find out about that, I'm going to arrest the brains behind the deal if I have to take all of you in. Now, if you think you can take those prisoners away from me, fly to it. You'll travel a long and rocky trail doing it, though. That's all. The door is open. You can leave any time."

"Just a minute," said Pat Frazier, his voice gruff but mollifying. "Let's talk this over. There are angles—"

"No angles," cut in Jim bitterly. "At Blue Slides I tried to get you to talk things over, to hit some agreement, and you cut me right off at the pockets. You told me to get out. Now I'm handing the same back to you. Get out! Start your hell raising if you want to. But every drop of blood spilled along that street—and there'll be plenty of it if you try and take those prisoners away from me—you'll have to answer for before you die. You know where I stand, and I'm not hedging one inch."

Mott started for the door. "We'll see if you talk the same an hour from now," he spat.

"No!" Pat Frazier spun on Mott. "Lay off the rough stuff, Hugh. I won't stand for it."

"Nor I," said Newt Cambrian. "Go easy, Mott—and you, Weeks. Come on, Pat, I'm taking my outfit home."

"So am I," nodded Frazier. "We want no bloodshed. Remember that, both of you."

They stamped out and Jim Rideout saw Frazier and Cambrian calling to members of their crews. Soon there was an exodus of riders from town. Hugh Mott and Hod Weeks, left on their own, had no stomach for trying to force an issue and they left also.

"Take a saunter down to the end of town, Drift," said Jim bleakly. "Just to make sure they don't change their minds. I'm not trusting anybody these days."

DRIFT nodded, stood his rifle inside the door, hitched up his gun belts and strode off. From the livery-barn corrals he saw that the cattle crews were really pulling out, so he started back toward the office. Then a voice reached him, a femi-

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nine voice. He turned and saw Anne Frazier standing in the wide door of the livery barn.

"Drift," she called. "I want to talk to you."

"Good!" drawled Drift. "And I want to talk to you."

She faced him, back in the gloom of the stable where they were unseen from the street. As a rule, Anne Frazier had a jaunty, imperious way about her. Just now she had neither. There was a pale, strained look on her pretty face, and she was twisting her hands nervously.

"Drift," she said, her voice as strained as her face, "this can't go on. It's leading up to something . . . something dreadful. And . . . and I'm afraid. Can't you do something, talk to Jim, make him understand? If he'd only—"

"Whoa!" cut in Drift. "Stop right there. I can't—and I wouldn't if I could. Influence Jim Rideout, I mean. Because Jim is in the right, all the way. He's a four-square man, doing his sworn duty. Now get hold of yourself, because I'm going to do some mighty straight talking. For the first time in your lives you and that cantankerous old bull bat of a father of yours have run into something you can't trample down and fashion to suit your own ends. You've run into the pride and character of one of the best men who ever wore boot leather. And you still got your fool necks bowed and think you can make that man bend the way you want him to. Wait a minute, let me have my say. I intend to, regardless.

"For a good many years Pat Frazier has rumbled up and down this valley, high and mighty and wise as seven hundred dollars. And his very lovely daughter has taken her cue from him. She's been a haughty little prig who thought because she was Anne Frazier she could ride roughshod over the feelings of other folks and get away with it. She thought that because Jim Rideout could grin and tolerate her little-girl tyranny she could wind him around her little finger. And when she found she couldn't, she started right out to trample his affection for her right into the dirt, never stopping to realize that she might be killing the most precious thing in the world. She was going to show him. So lately she's been running around a heap with that cold-eyed, double-crossing snake of a Hugh Mott. Well, all I can say, young lady, is this: If a whelp like Mott is your choice, stick to him. Jim Rideout is my choice, and I stick with him, come hell or high water. And that's that!"

Color was in Anne's face now, angry color. "You . . . you have no right to speak to me like that, Drift Delaware," she flared. "You—"

"There you go again," cut in Drift remorselessly. "Same old song. Nobody has any right to do this or that except you and your father and your fine friend Mr. Hugh Mott. It won't work any more, young lady. And as a final thought, instead of trying to make Jim understand and give in, why don't you and your father try and understand Jim's angle for a change and get it through your stubborn heads that he's right and you're wrong."

"You . . . you're impossible," Anne said, her voice quivering as though she was having difficulty keeping back tears.

"That means I'm right—and in your heart you know it," drawled Drift. "Don't forget, in trying to hurt Jim Rideout, you may hurt yourself more. I won't charge you a cent for this lecture, young lady.

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I hope it takes, but, knowing the Frazier outlook, I'm afraid it won't. Anything else?"

Anne didn't answer. Instead, she almost ran past him, out to where her horse was tethered. A moment later she was leaving town at a headlong run. Drift stared after her with musing eyes while he built a cigarette. He shrugged.

"Well," he murmured, "she got the licking Smoky Lake said she had coming, and I got a hunch those verbal switches I handed out hurt more than the real kind would. Either way, I gave the little rascal something to think about."

TWO days later the herds of Cold River Valley started moving into the Shoshones. Bob Arbogast brought Jim Rideout the report, and Jim sat in scowling thought.

"So the cattlemen are going to force the issue," he said presently. "There's six weeks of good grazing still in the valley, but they're letting that go to waste to shove their herds into the mountains ahead of time. Yeah, they aim to force the issue with the lumber company. This means, Bob, that we're just about going to have to spend the summer in the mountains ourselves, trying to keep the knotheads on both sides from getting too obstreperous."

"I dunno," said Bob, shaking his head. "I was dumb for a while myself—maybe like a sheep following other sheep. But now, darned if I can see why there ain't plenty of room in the Shoshones for cattle and lumbering both. After all, they don't lumber the open meadows and parks, and that's where the cattle feed."

Jim smiled wearily. "Simple, isn't it? But try and get the cattle outfits to see things that way. They can't, because they're doing so much worrying about their ancient rights, or some other tomfoolery."

The two prisoners, Bull Hunter and Stinger Yates, had settled down to a surly silence, and Jim was unable to get anything out of them concerning the brains behind the trestle-blasting episode. But Drift remarked one day: "We'll have to string our patience a while, Jim. Yates is a poisonous little devil with a certain kind of sand in his craw. But I think maybe Hunter'll open up when he finds himself actually face to face with a judge and we give him a chance on a lighter sentence if he talks. His spine ain't none too stout."

JIM and Drift took a couple of rides up into the mountains to keep an eye on things. The herds were well up on the summer range by this time, and in nearly every meadow and park they found grazing cattle. By the brands, it seemed that by prearrangement the Forked Arrow and Circle C herds had been driven to the north of the lumber headquarters, while the Rolling W and the Half Diamond Cross were driven south. Here and there the two lawmen ran across cowboys and found that the main camp of the combined Forked Arrow and Circle C was in a little aspen glade where a living spring flowed strong and fresh. And here they were met, if not by open hostility, at least with a very chill greeting. It was about midday when they rode up to the camp, but there was no invite to rest their saddles and have a meal. Neither Pat Frazier or Newt Cambrian were in evidence.

"You'd think we had the spotted fever," Drift growled as he and Jim rode away. "This set-up can't go

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on forever without a break. When it comes, I'm going to take supreme joy in knocking me a flock of heads together."

Jim nodded moodily. He was thinking how, back a few short weeks, he and Drift would have received boisterous welcome in that camp. But now, because he had stuck up for his principles, he was an outcast among men he had called his friends. And then there was Anne. Jim had not seen her for days, nor spoken to her since their quarrel in his office. He was gloomy, all the way back to town.

That evening Pat Frazier rode into town at a furious gallop and came stamping into the office, grim and savage.

"All right, Rideout," he rasped. "You ran down and arrested the men you claimed dynamited that lumber-company trestle. Now let's see if you can do as much for our side."

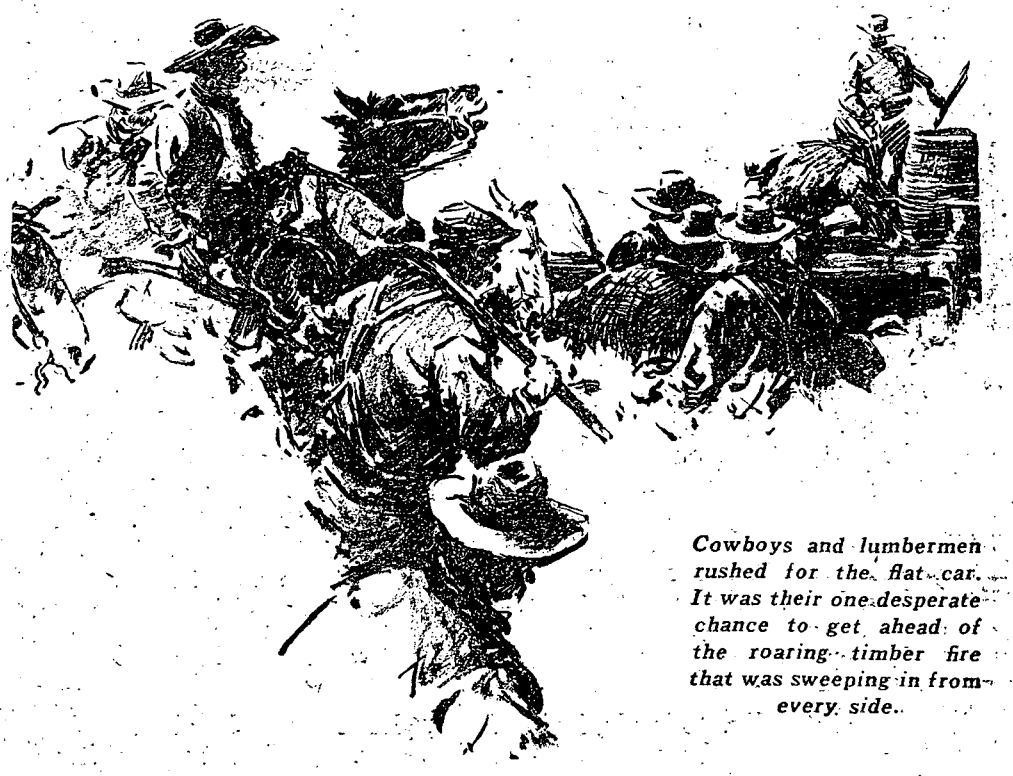
"What's wrong?" Jim asked curtly.

"Plenty. Two of my steers and one of Newt Cambrian's have been slow-elked by that cussed lumber outfit. Now let's see your law work there. It better, or Newt and me are going to pull us a lynching."

Jim was on his feet, already reaching for his gun belts. "You're sure lumber-company men did the job?"

"Sure! Of course we're sure. Who else could have done it? We didn't do it ourselves, that's a cinch. And it would be a cheap way of getting good beef for the lumber-company grub shack—if they had got away with it. You're damned right they did it."

"Go saddle the broncs, Drift," said Jim. "Bob, you stay here and



Cowboys and lumbermen rushed for the flat car. It was their one desperate chance to get ahead of the roaring timber fire that was sweeping in from every side.

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hold the fort. We may get back by this time tomorrow. We'll try to, anyhow."

CHAPTER VI

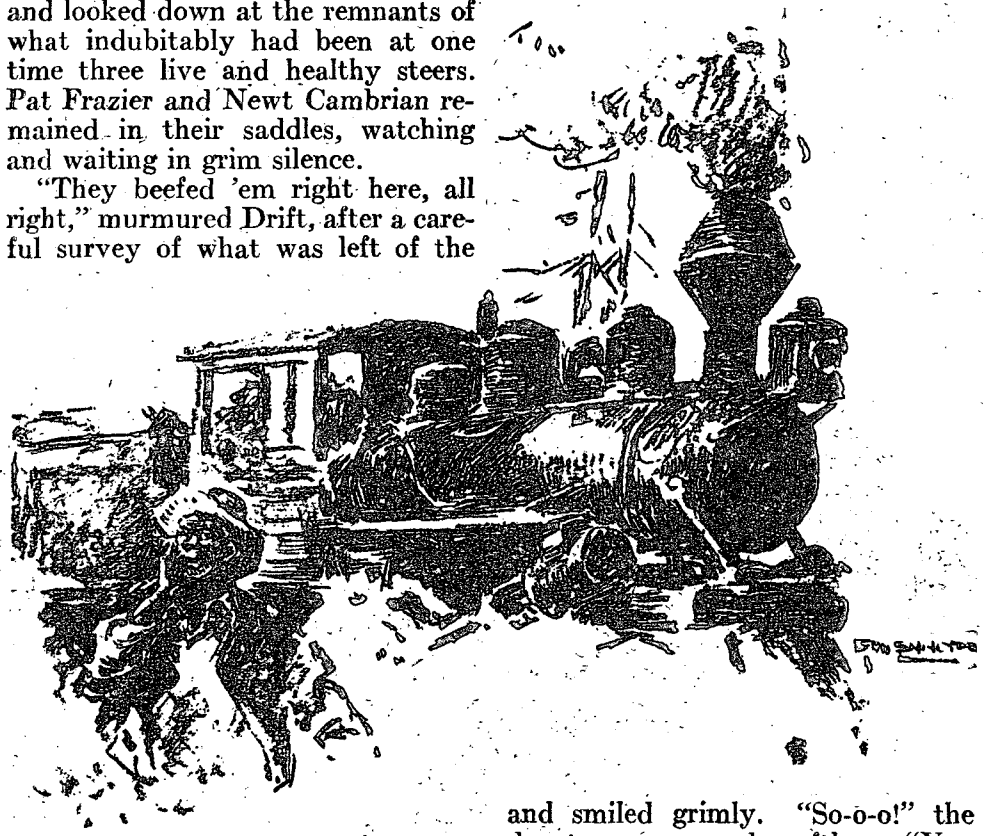
MURDER!

DAWN came coiling in cool, blue mists from the timber. Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware, who had spent the night at the cattle camp in the aspen glade at the gruff behest of Pat Frazier, dismounted at the edge of a thicket of jack pines and looked down at the remnants of what indubitably had been at one time three live and healthy steers. Pat Frazier and Newt Cambrian remained in their saddles, watching and waiting in grim silence.

"They beefed 'em right here, all right," murmured Drift, after a careful survey of what was left of the carcasses. "Shot the critters and then beefed 'em, taking only the loins and hams."

Jim, frowning intently, nodded. "Two Forked Arrow, one Circle C. And they left the hides right here, so the owners would be sure and identify their property. Yeah, instead of cutting out a stray, which, with all the stock roaming the meadows now, would be easy to do, and then making it pack its own meat good and close to home before beefing it, they knock down three way out here, take the hams and loins and leave the carcasses where they're sure to be found. Especially the hides, with the brands plain for the world to see."

Drift's head came up and he stared steadily at Jim, who shrugged and smiled grimly. "So-o-o!" the deputy murmured softly. "You shrewd old son of a gun! You spotted the deal right off the bat. You think they"—he jerked his head slightly toward the two grimly waiting cattlemen—"maybe laid this thing out to try and pin a case on the lumber crowd?"



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"Not Pat or Newt," answered Jim quietly. "But maybe somebody else who'd like to stir up a bite of trouble for the lumber crowd and put me on a spot at the same time. Come on. I'm going to ask those two some questions."

He walked over to where the two cattlemen waited. "Well," growled Frazier, "no need of wasting time, is there? I want to see you get along over to the lumber headquarters and slap an arrest on somebody."

"No sense to that," said Jim briefly. "I'll bet my right leg the lumber crowd had nothing to do with that slow-elking job."

"The devil they didn't!" snorted Frazier. "You're probably saying that just as an excuse to—"

"Wait a minute!" Jim's voice took on a cold snap. "I wish you'd quit bellowing and trying to make me out a creeping dog all the time, Pat. You have no idea how thin you've got my patience worn. Now, just for once, listen for a change and open your mind to common sense. You're so damned hipped against the lumber layout you're ready to jump at them on any old excuse. Let's look at this proposition with our eyes open.

"Now, tell me. If you were going to slow-elk some beef belonging to someone else, would you pull the job in a spot where it would be dead easy to find the evidence? Would you just take the loins and hams and then, above all, would you leave the hides with the brands intact there in broad daylight so the owner of the critter would be dead certain to identify the property? Would you?"

"Well—no, I wouldn't," blurted Frazier. "Nobody with a jot of sense would do that. But—"

"No buts about it," cut in Jim. "Now this lumber-company superintendent, Custis—call him anything you want except a fool. Because he's not. He wouldn't hold the job he does if he was a fool. Now, only a fool would pull this kind of a slow-elking job, unless—get this—unless it was done with the deliberate intent by someone to point you and Newt at the lumber crowd for a real trouble ride. Or didn't such a possibility strike you?"

It was Newt Cambrian who answered, his voice reluctant. "It didn't—until now. But it's beginning to look more and more that way to me."

"But who . . . who—" stuttered Pat Frazier.

Jim smiled grimly. "Suppose we see if we can find out. You know, there's one fact which rustlers, slow-elkers, trestle dynamiters and their like always seem to forget—and that fact is, horses leave tracks. That meat wasn't carried out by hand. Horses carried it. Suppose we ride a few circles and see what we can find."

IT was Drift again who picked up the trail, gouges in a mat of pine needles where horses had moved. In a second the deputy was out of the saddle and kneeling by those gouges, his eyes intent.

"This is it," he announced triumphantly. "The broncs that left this sign packed that meat. 'Cause why? Look at that line of green flies, buzzing just above the pine needles. 'Cause why, again? Blood, gentlemen—blood dripping from new-butchered meat. Let's go!"

The trail led west in a wide circle. It crossed the newly laid narrow-gauge railroad tracks, sweeping slowly south beyond the edge of the farthest lumbering activity, past the big meadow where the mill and buildings of the lumber outfit were

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going up, where nearly a hundred men were laboring, felling timbers, shaping and fitting them.

South the trail led, swinging west again, into a country of narrow, rocky, brush and timber-choked gulches. Above one particularly deep and brush-matted gulch, Drift, who was riding in the lead, reined in, staring at the ground.

"They made a stop here for some reason," he announced. "I wonder why?"

"To get rid of the meat," said Jim. "Look—up yonder, some ravens beginning to gather, and down there in the brush, some camp-robber birds. Drift, were you to slide down into that brush I'll bet you'd find something."

"Then I'm sliding," said Drift, making good his word.

"What's the idea?" growled Frazier, reining in beside Jim. "I'm frank to admit that this deal has a nastier look to it all the time. But why stop now? I want to find where those cussed bronc tracks lead."

"We're just making sure the meat is down there," said Jim. "How about it, Drift?" he called. "Find anything?"

"Plenty," came the answer. "The meat is here—all that the coyotes didn't chaw up last night. Plenty of good beef gone to waste, what I mean."

For a wonder, Pat Frazier did not start to bellow. He twisted in his saddle and looked at Newt Cambrian.

"Newt," he said slowly, "it's barely possible you and me been a pair of knotheads—in several ways. This whole damn thing is a frame-up of some sort. We've been played for a pair of suckers. The trail of those meat-packing broncs was laid real cunning. It pointed just enough at the lumber headquarters so a man real mad over having some of his critters beefed, would jump complete at conclusions and barge right into the lumber camp, breathing hell and brimstone. And start something, maybe, that would have raised hell and put a rock under it. I'll make one more guess. Were we to follow these tracks farther, we'd find they'd scattered and taken to rough country, where they'd peter out on us."

Jim Rideout's grim smile became almost a grin. "You're getting the hang of this sheriffing game real good, Pat. I'll bet money that you're plumb correct about that last. Some real slickery juniper pulled this trick."

"Jim," said Newt Cambrian, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to apologize to you one of these days."

"Me," said Frazier darkly, "I'm going to go calling and ask some damned straight questions. And it won't be lumbermen I'll be asking 'em of, either."

"Don't do it, Pat," said Jim. "Even if you were guessing right, you couldn't prove a single thing. And you might put somebody on their guard. The thing to do is keep still, don't let on that there was any slow-elking at all that you know of, or anything else wrong. Sooner or later, this smart jigger will make a mistake right out in the open. That will be the time to jump on him."

Pat Frazier scowled, but nodded. "Seeing as I been wrong in a couple of spots, Jim—and you been right—I'll change the habits of a lifetime and take a little advice instead of handin' it out. We'll keep our mouths shut and eyes open and wait for that break."

"You do that, Pat. You'll be surprised how things work themselves out. Now if it's all the same to you,

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Drift and me will get back to town. We got a couple of prisoners down there I'm anxious to get before a judge and off our hands, one way or another."

HOURS later, jogging down out of the last foothills of the Shoshones, Jim and Drift met a lone rider. It was Anne Frazier. She was leading a well-loaded pack horse behind her. At sight of them, Anne's little chin went up defiantly, and she would have passed with a very frigid nod if Jim had not swung his horse across the trail before her.

"Summering in the mountains, Anne?" asked Jim.

"Perhaps," she answered frigidly. "Any suggestions?"

"Yes. You'll find your dad's camp in that aspen glade where we saw that black bear a couple of years ago."

"Thank you," she said tartly, "but I knew that already."

She pulled out of the trail, rode around Jim and Drift and went on. The new animation which had shone in Jim Rideout's face ever since he had at last found Newt Cambrian and Pat Frazier willing to meet him halfway, faded, to be replaced with the grim, tight-jawed, weary look he had worn so much of late. Drift Delaware swore softly to himself as they slogged along into the valley.

When they reached town and the livery barn, Old Man Timm came out. "I'll handle your broncs, Jim," he offered. "You better get right over to Doc Lester's office. He's got Bob Arbogast there, and Bob didn't look none too good to me when they were packing him over."

"Bob Arbogast! You mean, Bob Arbogast's been hurt? How? When?"

"Sometime last night, I reckon. Frank Rousey passed the office this morning before sunup and saw the door was wide open. He wondered about that and looked in. There was Bob, crumpled up on the floor, his head all bloody. And Jim, the jail is open and your two prisoners gone!"

IT was after midnight, but two lights still burned in Eagleville. One of those lights was in Doc Lester's place. The other was in Sheriff Jim Rideout's office. In the office, Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware sat in grim silence, faces drawn, eyes bleak.

There was a timid knock at the door, then shriveled-up little Frank Rousey, who ran a saddle shop next door, came in.

"You . . . you don't mind, Jim?" he asked. "I just can't sleep. I keep thinking of Bob, lying there. Rideout, his tone low and colorless. How—what does Doc think of his chances?"

"None at all, Frank," answered "They clubbed him twice, and the second blow was what did it. Caved his skull. If I only had some lead, some idea who—" His voice trailed off into silence.

"I set up a holler," twanged Rousey monotonously. "Micky Shrader and Johnny Whipple come over, and we packed him down to Doc's place. I remember every little part about it, even how this cartridge dropped out of his hand when we lifted him up. How—"

Jim lunged up in his chair. "What's that?" he demanded. "You say he dropped a cartridge, that he had a cartridge in his hand?"

Rousey's eyes bugged, and he swallowed rapidly. "Why . . . why, yes, Jim. I got it here. I never thought—just picked it up and put it in my pocket. It's just

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an ordinary .45. It—"

Jim snatched the cartridge from the stableman's fumbling fingers and leaned close to the lamp to examine it. It had been a long time in a cartridge belt, long enough to show some discoloration on the brass case. The lead point was gray and battered, except for one spot, which was worn bright and smooth. As Jim Rideout stared at that bright, smooth spot a cold gleam leaped in his eyes.

"The lamp, Drift," he said brusquely. "Hold it down here, close to the floor. Maybe . . . maybe—" He himself was already on his knees on the wooden floor.

There was a dark stain where Bob Arbogast's battered head had rested. It was out past that spot where Jim started examining every inch of the floor.

"Little lower with the lamp, Drift—over to that side a little more. Hold it—hold it right there!"

The angle of the light picked up what he'd been looking for, the faintest of lead marking on the floor. Jim's lips were moving noiselessly as he began the slow spelling of the wavering, faint letters that line traced.

"I got it, Drift!" he yelled. "I got it! Gustine! Bob wrote 'Gustine' on the floor with that cartridge point. It's been scuffed and trampled plenty, but there's no mistake. Shad Gustine is the man we want!"

Drift's alert mind leaped to the picture. "That could explain him being hit twice, Jim. Gustine was the guy who clubbed him first. Then, while Gustine was getting Hunter and Yates out of jail with Bob's keys, Bob came to enough to do what he could to tip us off to who was responsible. Coming back out of the jail, those damned whelps found Bob stirring around, so they hit him again, for keeps."

Jim nodded. "I reckon you've got it right, Drift. And—"

There was a step at the door. It was Micky Shrader, his face very grave. "Just stopped at Doc's to see how Bob was doing, boys," he said soberly. "He's gone, died about two minutes ago."

CHAPTER VII

CATTLE IN THE TIMBER

IN the gray light of faintest, early dawn, Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware rode up to the Half Diamond Cross ranch buildings. The place seemed deserted, but in the bunkhouse they found a single rider, a half-crippled old fellow whom Hugh Mott had left as caretaker of the place while he and the rest of his men were up in the mountains with the summer range herd. The man was surly and mumbling as they stirred him from sleep and asked him questions.

No, he hadn't seen Gustine since the herd pulled out for the mountains. He hadn't seen any of the outfit since then, in fact. Jim Rideout had a hunch the old fellow was telling the truth, so he and Drift hit straight away for the mountains again. As they climbed, a gusty west wind began buffeting their faces, snoring through the timber.

"Feels like a late storm might hit the high country," observed Drift. "Especially if that wind works a little more to the south. Where you aiming for, Jim—Mott's and Weeks' camp?"

"Not yet. I want to see Frazier and Cambrian first and let them know what some of their fine friends have done. I think the news of Bob's murder will really open their eyes toward those two outfits."

They found Frazier and Cambrian in camp, directing hurried prepara-

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tions in making everything snug and secure against the drive of the wind.

"Just our luck to have a late storm strike," growled Pat Frazier. "And clouds are building up, southwest. Guess we're in for it. What's ailing you two? You look awful gloomy to me."

"Murder, Pat," answered Jim quietly. "While Drift and me were up here looking into that slow-elking trick, Shad Gustine killed Bob Arbogast and turned loose Bull Hunter and Stinger Yates!"

Pat Frazier stared at Jim's stony face. "You don't mean it?"

"I do, every word of it. Now I hope you're not going to try and tell me I shouldn't go after Gustine and those who set him up to the trick just because they're cattlemen."

"No, by Satan!" thundered Frazier. "Murder is pilin' it on too thick. Go get 'em, and—"

"Hey, boss," yelled a puncher, "that stuff off to the southwest ain't all clouds. Some of it's smoke!"

Pat Frazier whirled and stared, and Jim Rideout stared with him. The cowboy was right. That murky turbulence boiling up above the treetops was smoke.

"Timber fire," said Frazier jerkily. "With this wind that can be bad—mighty bad. And us with thousands of dollars' worth of cattle in the timber." He turned, and his voice lifted in an old-time roar. "Every man up and out! We got to get down there and try and stop that fire!"

The cavvy herd was feeding in the lower meadow, and cowboys went off at a run with ropes and saddles. The Forked Arrow cook, a white-haired old Negro, came shuffling up.

"Marse Boss," he said, "Missy Anne—she went ridin' dis mo'nin' off thataway. Yo' don't think she might get cotched by dat fiah?"

FRAZIER'S face went white beneath its weathered tan. He shot a harassed look at Jim. "That's right. She told me she was going down that way. She hasn't seen the lumber operations. Maybe—"

There was a shrill yell at the lower end of the meadow, and a moment later a speeding figure came flashing up. It was Anne, her hair flying loose, her eyes enormous in her flushed face.

"Dad!" she cried. "Dad! The whole ridge is afire down there—and spreading fast. The lumbermen are already out, fighting it. And, dad . . . I . . . I saw it start. Men started that fire. And Hugh Mott was one of them. I . . . I saw him, dad."

She was trembling, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. Pat Frazier lifted her from the saddle. "Steady, lass, steady," he said comfortingly. "You and me been away off in our judgment of a lot of things, looks like. But we got our eyes cleared up at last."

Mounted men tore away into the timber, Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware riding in the forefront. Everywhere in the timber, cattle were moving, bawling, and uneasy, for the smell of smoke was thickening in the air.

The speeding riders struck the long meadow where the mill and headquarters of the lumber company were partially erected. All kinds of heavy, ponderous, but highly valuable mill equipment and machinery stood about. The lumber company stood to lose thousands and thousands of dollars if that fire got this far.

The smoke thickened with every racing stride. They pitched down a long slope, burst through a fringe of timber into a long, narrow, curving meadow which angled roughly east

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and west. And here they found the lumber crew. Men were racing to a couple of wagons, loaded with axes, shovels and other tools. With these they sped to each end of the meadow, where they began frantically cutting, slashing and digging, hewing out hasty fire lines. Others were already across the meadow, setting a backfire.

In the thickening smoke, Jim Rideout nearly rode Mike Custis down. The lumber superintendent was raging.

"That fire didn't just start," he yelled savagely. "Men started it—cattlemen—the damned, blind savage fools. Cattlemen did, understand?"

Jim swung down. "Yes," he agreed. "They did. But not these cattlemen with me. They're here to help fight the fire. They need tools. Axes, shovels, grubbing hooks—"

"The wagons," Custis threw at him. "Plenty of tools. Let's see if you mean it."

Led by Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware, the Forked Arrow and the Circle C crews pitched in with a will. They worked side by side with sweating, toiling lumberjacks and mill men.

Bewildered, smoke-dazed birds fluttered by. Deer came bounding past, soft eyes dark with the terror of the flames. A bear lumbered through, passing within ten feet of one of the men, but paying them no attention. And some cattle, a few of the wilder, more adventurous spirits of the herd.

The smoke curtain thickened, acrid and choking, until men but a few yards apart were all but invisible to one another. The wind was shifting, more and more to the south, and those men battling at the east end of the meadow saw their chances of stopping the flames there increasing. Because there the ridge lifted and the main funneling effect of the wind was lower down to the west.

Here, along with the ever-thickening smoke, sparks rode the wind, cinders flung high by the updraft over the caldron of flame, then hurried forward by the wind to set new fires.

And Jim Rideout, half blinded with sweat and smoke, throat raw and swollen from smoke, realized that here, at the west end of the meadow, the task was hopeless. The smoke had a reddish tinge to it, and the crackling of the racing flames was like a steadily sustained volley of rifle fire.

SOMEBODY got Jim by the arm. It was Mike Custis. "No use," yelled the lumberman. "We can handle it at the other end, but not here. The wind's picking up. Get your men back before they're trapped."

Between them, Jim and Custis got the men out and back to the meadow. All were choking and reeling, their lungs almost bursting, eyes red-rimmed and scorched. And with a triumphant roar the red fire demon hurtled past, dooming magnificent timber and frantic, trapped cattle to the north.

Custis seemed bitter and inarticulate with despair. Jim shook his arm.

"There's still a chance," he yelled hoarsely, "and that shifting wind will help. If we can get the men up to that sawtooth ridge northwest of your headquarters, we got a chance to keep it on the west slope. If we do that, we can force it out into that brushy gulch country and save that heavy timber above. But we got to get there quick!"

Custis stared at him almost va-

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cantly. Then the idea took and the lumberman raced up the meadow, yelling at his crew. Some of the men he left at the east end of the meadow, to make sure the sly fire demon did not creep around against the wind and attack their rear. The rest went scurrying back up the slope toward the big headquarters clearing. Jim and Drift and the cowboys were back in their saddles by the time Custis returned.

"We got our engine and one car ready to go on our narrow-gauge track," he yelled. "I figured to give it a trial run this morning. We can outrun those flames that way. Get up there fast as you can."

Jim waved an arm and spurred away, the rest racing after him. They gained the big meadow where the mill was building. Here, sure enough, sheltered by one corner of the partially finished mill building, where he had not seen it on the first mad dash along the meadow to meet the fire, Jim saw the powerful little compound narrow-gauge engine with a lone, narrow flatcar behind.

As Jim led the way up with a rush, a grizzled man in greasy overalls came running, waving a heavy wrench.

"Get away!" he yelled angrily. "Get away from that engine, you blasted saddle pounders. You've raised enough hell without trying to wreck my engine."

"We're not going to touch your cussed engine," rapped Jim. "Get it ready to go. Custis and his men will be here in a minute. You've got to haul all of us out along and ahead of that fire. We're aiming to try and stop it higher up. Get that engine ready to roll!"

The cowboys, still clinging to ax and shovel and grubbing hooks, left their saddles and clambered onto the car. The engineer watched them, then jerked his head, swung into the tiny cab, opened the firebox and started jamming in pitch-filled pine slabs.

The first of the lumbermen began to arrive, gasping for breath and streaming with sweat. Custis rode up in one of the tool wagons. Extra tools were heaped on the flatcar. Men kept staggering up, clambering aboard. Custis himself climbed into the tender, began packing more fuel into the firebox. The last of the lumber crew arrived, were hauled onto the car, and Custis gave the signal. A jerk and they were moving, rolling out across the meadow.

TO their left and below the rim of the meadow the smoke clouds billowed, shot through with the crimson of licking flames. Under the push of the wind, that fire was racing. But the compound was getting down to work now, speeding faster and faster. First time over a new roadbed, this was, but under the urgings of Custis, the engineer held nothing back. The flatcar, with its clinging load of men, whipped along behind, whistling through timber, roaring over trestles, plunging anew into the timber beyond. And it was drawing steadily ahead of the flames.

The engine and car ran clear to the spot of the dynamited trestle. Here the men clambered off and Custis sent the engineer back to get the outfit to the reasonable safety of the big meadow.

Jim Rideout was already leading the men to the sawtooth ridge he had planned on as a last stand. The southern side of that ridge was fairly open, with a few small isolated stands of scanty timber.

"If we can get the thickest of that timber down," he panted to Custis, "we'll kill that blasted crown fire.

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But we've got to fell trees like they were never felled before."

They hadn't much time. The fire was coming on remorselessly. But they tried. Axes bit, helve-deep, into living wood. White chips peeled and flew. Towering trees shivered, moaned, arced against the darkening sky, crashed down.

Down in the maw of the fire, terrible sounds arose, carrying even above the roar of flames. Mad bellowings of frantic, dying cattle, cattle blinded, bewildered, mad with the terror of the red death which trapped them, hemmed them in and consumed them. Cowboys, hearing, cursed brokenly and labored on with crashing axes.

The heat flowing up ahead of the flames was a ghastly thing. Living foliage curled and shriveled before the eyes of the toiling men. Smoke engulfed them and men began to stagger, choking. A man working beside Jim Rideout collapsed and despair wrung Rideout's heart. They couldn't win! They hadn't had time enough!

A blazing frond, heavy with pitch, carried on the powerful draft of the flames, came whirling through the smoke, lodged in the lower branches of a group of sugar pines. Flames sheeted up in a crackling rush. And again Custis had hold of Jim.

"No use, Rideout," he gasped. "We can't stop it. Get the men out —get 'em out!"

A strangely livid, sinister light flailed across the mountain world, cutting through smoke murk, turning the faces of men a greenish white. And right after it a thunderous volleying of sound, sound which dwarfed the voice of the fire, sound which seemed to shake the very earth.

And then rain—rain in a roaring, smashing deluge, falling in the solid, drenching curtain that only a high mountain thunderstorm can produce.

Men were soaked through in an instant, but they didn't mind. The wonder and joy of it struck them dumb. They tipped their scorched, strained faces to it, lifted their arms as though to embrace it. And when bolt after bolt of livid lightning flickered and glared, while one volley after another of crashing thunder pealed and smashed, men laughed drunkenly and let the blessed rain wash across their faces like tears of relief.

In twos and threes they climbed slowly to the top of the ridge. Down below them, the smoke lay in a sullen, thinning blanket. Nowhere did a bit of flame show. The gray curtain of rain washed the stark skeletons of blackened timber, rank on rank of it, reaching away to the south, clear to the origin of the fire. Scorched earth steamed and cooled and was drenched. Even the sullen smoke seemed to be washed away.

Custis stood beside Jim Rideout. "I don't know," he mumbled wearily. "I've never been a religious man—but nothing except a miracle could've saved us!"

CHAPTER VIII

CLOSED BOOKS

IT was another day. At the head of the combined outfits of the Forked Arrow and the Circle C, Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware rode with Pat Frazier and Newt Cambrian. The storm had gone the way of all late storms. Here, south of the lumber headquarters, timber was green and vigorous, and an aromatic pungency arose from the moist forest floor. In the morning sunlight the clean, washed air held a sparkle.

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It was a morning to make men smile and relax.

But these men, as they rode, were stern of face and eye. Pat Frazier gave certain orders to the cowboys, and they scattered off and were lost in the timber. And a little later, when Frazier led the way into an emerald meadow where the camps of the Half Diamond Cross and Rolling W outfits were pitched, those cowboys began showing up at various spots about the meadow. And they were alert and grim.

Hugh Mott and Hod Weeks were in the act of cinching saddles on a pair of broncs. So was Shad Gustine. Over to one side, where they had been lounging on some blankets, Stinger Yates and Bull Hunter got to their feet, startled and wary.

Hugh Mott's cold eyes likewise showed a startled flicker. But he veiled it quickly and was almost effusive in his cordiality.

"Hello, Pat—Newt. Hod and me were just going to ride up to your camp for a talk with you. About the way that damned lumber outfit tried to burn up our herds. We had a devil of a time getting some of our cattle out of the path of it. We knew you'd be in a tough spot up north, and had our crews ready to ride to help you when the storm broke. After that—"

"Mott," broke in Frazier harshly, "you're a dirty, lying dog, and you've run your luck to the last, frazzled end. Things have caught up with you."

FOR a moment Hugh Mott stood very still. His cold eyes hardened to a queer, set glaze, though his face still showed a rather frozen smile. "Why, Pat," he said thinly, "I don't understand. I—"

"You better understand," rasped Frazier. "You had me fooled, Mott. Yeah, you made a sucker of Cambrian and me. You filled our minds with fool's wool. But that fire—and a couple of other angles—washed it out for us. You see, Mott, Anne happened to see you and some of your damned whelps start that fire!"

Gustine stirred restlessly, moved a little away from his horse. The mask of Hugh Mott's face grew harder.

"I hate to disagree with a lady," he said. "But I've got to, there. Anne is mistaken. Why, Pat—it don't make sense. Why should I—"

"It makes plenty of sense, now that Newt and me got our eyes open, Mott," cut in Frazier savagely. "We'll tend to you in a minute, you damned, creeping coyote. Jim, it's your say, first."

Jim's eyes had not moved from Shad Gustine. Now he spoke tersely. "I want you, Gustine. You and Yates and Hunter. But mainly you. Bob Arbogast died from that gun whipping you gave him. I want you for murder, Gustine!"

Gustine did not waste any time trying to talk himself into the clear, as Mott had done. There was a hard, tough streak in Gustine. He knew when the chips were down, like now. And he played the string out. He leaped, trying to put one of the horses between himself and Jim Rideout, at the same time dragging at his guns.

He didn't quite make it. A slug caught him just short of the horse, spinning him and sending him staggering. He clung to his feet and flung a shot in reply and, just in back of Jim Rideout and a trifle to one side, Newt Cambrian's bronc melted under him, shot in the head. Then Jim Rideout pounded two more slugs into Gustine and the fellow was down and still.

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Over to one side, Stinger Yates yelled savagely, once. Then he choked and staggered, and with guns half free, slowly spun and collapsed. And Drift Delaware, smoking gun in hand, spurred down on Bull Hunter.

"The same for you, Hunter—if you want it," the deputy rasped.

The stuff wasn't in Bull Hunter to go through with it. His hands lifted. "I pass!" he gulped hoarsely.

Jim Rideout slid from his saddle and walked over to Shad Gustine's crumpled figure. And Hugh Mott, his face now a vicious, desperate mask, thought he saw his chance. He had a gun out and was cutting down on Jim when Pat Frazier went into action. He beat Mott to the shot by a split second and drove a crashing slug into the man, heart-high.

From the first shot to the last had been but a space of seconds. And now, any members of Mott's and Hod Weeks' crew who might have felt the urge to smoke it out, got over that urge in a hurry as they saw Forked Arrow and Circle C riders moving in on the meadow on all sides, guns bared and ready.

Hod Weeks was shaking and white as he stared at the three dead men on the ground. "I wasn't in on it," he mumbled thickly. "I wasn't in on it!"

"From where I stand you were," growled Pat Frazier. "So, here's the answer, Weeks. There's no room in the Shoshone range or in Cold River Valley for you any longer. You got two weeks to settle affairs and get out. If you're not gone by then—well, you'll have to take your chances."

"No!" squalled Weeks, with a sudden burst of ratlike courage. "You can't do that to me. I'll appeal to the law. I'll—"

Frazier laughed harshly. "All right. How about it, Jim? He's appealing to the law. Can he stay, or does he have to get out?"

"He can stay," replied Jim gravely. "If he wants to stand trial for his part in starting that fire, in breaking Yates and Hunter out of jail, in the murder of Bob Arbogast, and in dynamiting that railroad trestle. Yeah, he can stay."

"You can't prove a thing," bawled Weeks. "But I don't want to live in any damned country where everybody gangs up on a man."

Jim caught Pat Frazier's eye and winked.

LEADING three horses, each with a dead man tied across the saddle, Jim Rideout and Drift Delaware pulled to a halt at the head of the road which the lumber-company wagons had cut up the mountain slopes from the valley. Bull Hunter sat upright in his saddle, but his wrists were bound to the saddlehorn. And Pat Frazier and Newt Cambrian were on hand, too.

"If I thought we could have really proved a case against Weeks, I'd have slapped an arrest on him," Jim told the two cowmen. "But I doubt we could have. So it's better this way. He'll clear out, and we'll be well shut of him. Now here's what I want you and Newt to do, Pat. Go have a talk with Custis. You'll find him ready to co-operate. I think you realize by now that there's plenty of room in these mountains for your cattle and his lumber operations at the same time. Mott was the trouble maker. He pulled that slow-elking trick, and when that didn't work to throw you and Newt into open war against Custis, he touched off that fire, aiming to burn the lumber company out, and not giving a damn whether he burned most of your herd besides. Mott was a

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schemer, a cold-blooded schemer, probably working toward the day when he controlled about everything in Cold River Valley in the way of cattle and range. We're all well out of a dirty mess. Now let's try and get along."

"As far as Newt and me are concerned," vowed Frazier, "there'll never be another lick of trouble with anybody. You and Drift ride up to the camp and visit us once in a while. You'll be more than welcome. And Jim, I'm glad it was me who got Mott. I'm hoping it will make things even for the way I've played a knot-headed fool. Good luck!"

TWO weeks had gone by. Neither Jim Rideout or Drift Delaware had been back in the mountains since then. Eagleville, after its first burst of amazement over all the startling developments, had settled back into its leisurely groove of existence. Bull Hunter had pleaded guilty of his part in the dynamiting of the trestle and gotten three years in the State penitentiary for it. But when he had sworn he'd had no part in the clubbing of Bob Arbogast, Jim and the judge had believed him. Hunter said that Shad Gustine had struck both the blows which had brought about the deputy's death. It was a chapter Jim Rideout was glad to close.

Came a drowsy forenoon when Drift had been over in the Starlight playing solo with Micky Shrader. The game had ended, and Drift was about to return to the office when Anne Frazier came riding into town. Drift dodged back into the saloon and watched through a window. He saw the girl pull up before the office, dismount, hesitate a moment, then resolutely climb the steps.

Drift turned to Micky Shrader with a grin. "Break out that bottle of private stock, Micky. You and I are going to have a drink."

"Big-hearted, eh?" twinkled Micky. "Let's see the color of your money."

"A drink," Drift continued, "to Jim Rideout—and his future good luck."

"In that case," said Micky, "it'll be on the house."

Over in the office, Jim Rideout had come to his feet with a swift lunge. "Hello, Anne," he said. "I was thinking about you."

She looked at him with level, quiet eyes—eyes with a new softness in them.

"I'm glad you were, Jim," she said steadily. "Now—when a person has been wrong about something and wants to admit it, how do they go about it without seeming clumsy and stupid?"

"In a case like that, I'd say the best thing would be for everybody to forget past unpleasantness and start over, Anne."

The glow in her eyes deepened. "You're a very generous man, Jim Rideout. Is . . . is there any chance for me to . . . to get back on that pedestal, Jim?"

The lines of his face softened. "You're right back at the top again, Anne. In fact, you've never been anywhere else."

Anne's lips quivered and her eyes filled. Neither of them knew quite how it happened then, but she was in Jim's arms and he was holding her close to him.

"If . . . if you're going to kiss me, Jim," Anne suggested meekly, "I think you'd better before I start to bawl and get all smeary."

And Sheriff Jim Rideout proved that he was quite able to take a hint.

THE END.

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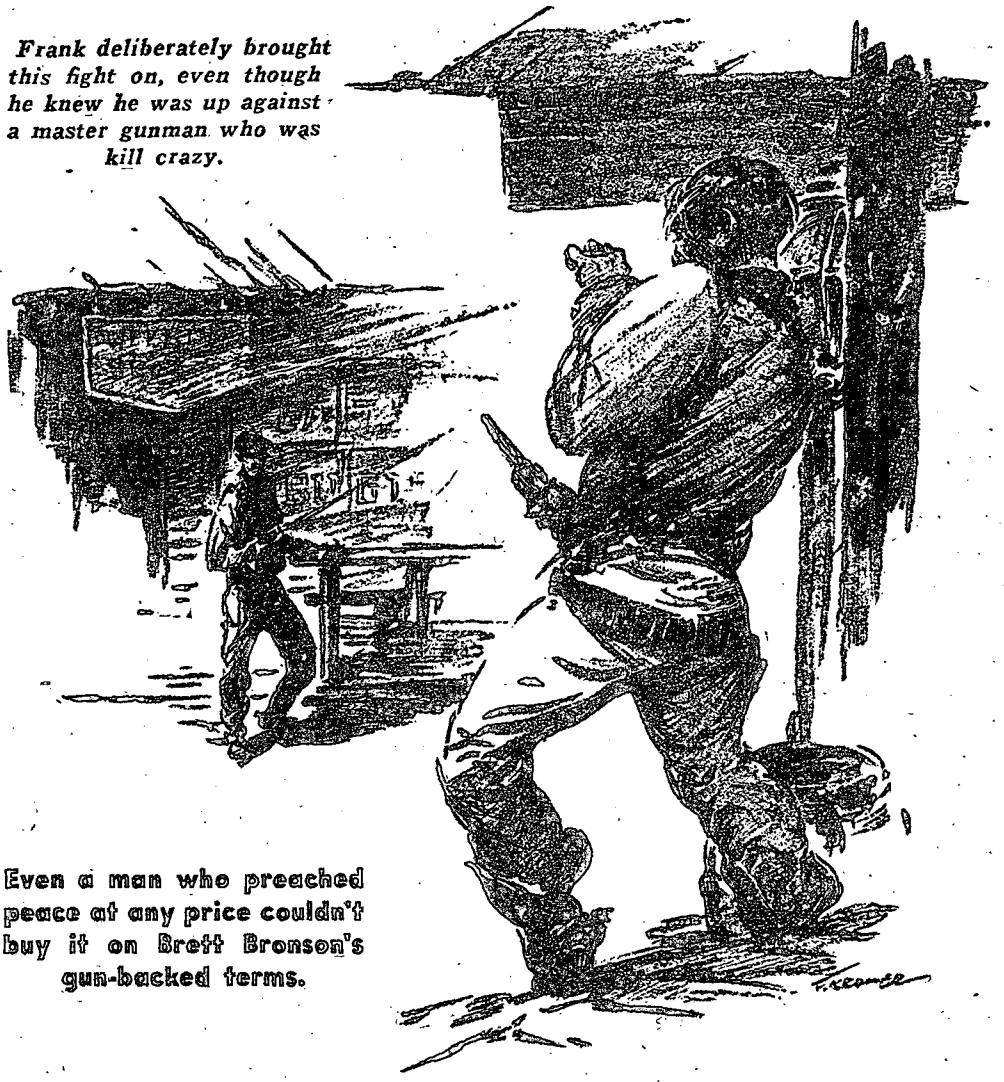

Frank deliberately brought this fight on, even though he knew he was up against a master gunman who was kill crazy.

Even a man who preached peace at any price couldn't buy it on Brett Bronson's gun-backed terms.

GUNSLICK'S HANDICAP

BY L. ERNENWEIN

A BLOOD-RED SUN hammered Latigo's Main Street with blast-furnace intensity. Its slanting rays struck the metal sign of the *Weekly Bugle* with a dazzling burst of deflected radiance; and below that sign, in the littered printing office, two men talked of sudden death.

They were a strange team, these two pioneer printers, unlike in face and form and in the way of their thinking. Frank Stonecypher was

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tall and gaunt, with an almost wistful shyness in his brown eyes; Jim Kenyon was short, blocky-faced and eager-eyed. Both were in their middle twenties, but now, as Stonecypher gravely considered the proof sheet of a story, he looked ten years older than his partner.

"The pen," Frank observed thoughtfully, "may be mightier than the sword, but it's no match for a six-gun, Jim. If we run this story we might be called on to back it with bullets."

"I've already thought about that," his partner told him.

A rash grin brightened his round, boyish face. Opening a drawer of the battered desk, he drew out a new revolver. "I'm going to show this town's scared rabbits that one renegade gambler like Brett Bronson can't spook the Latigo *Bugle* without a fight!" he declared vehemently.

That shocked Frank Stonecypher completely. He had always known this brother of the girl he intended to marry had a reckless streak in him, and the burning zeal of a born crusader; but that Jim would resort to the use of firearms seemed utterly fantastic. He wouldn't stand any show at all against Brett Bronson; the gunslick gambler would kill him as he had killed drunken Dave Jordan last Saturday. Recalling the bloody finality of that killing, Frank shivered.

"Don't be foolish!" he exclaimed. Then added quietly, "We're not running a reform journal, Jim. If Latigo isn't interested enough in its own welfare to hire a city marshal, why should we risk our necks shouting for law and order?"

Jim Kenyon laughed thinly, without mirth. "I knew you'd run up the white flag," he said. "But I'm prepared for that, too. From now on the *Bugle* is through pussyfooting. It's going to be a real newspaper. If you don't like that policy, I'll buy you out!"

Frank dropped his gaze. He knew very well that Jim was calling him a coward. Jim, who had wanted to start blasting editorially at Brett Bronson two months ago, was through listening to the counsel of a partner who hated violence in all its forms. Perhaps Jim was right; perhaps he *was* a coward.

FRANK was wondering about that when Jane Kenyon stepped in from the sidewalk and asked gayly: "Why so solemn, gentlemen?"

Hastily Jim shoved the gun back into the drawer, while Frank stood up. Jane's blue eyes flashed her appreciation of his courtesy and her lips curved into a smile as she seated herself on a corner of the desk.

"We were just having a confab on policy, Jane," Jim explained. "I've offered to buy Frank's share of the paper."

"Why?" Her lips were still smiling as she asked the question. Then something she glimpsed in Frank Stonecypher's eyes brought a quick gravity to her oval face.

"Because Frank is a natural-born pussyfooter," Jim declared. "He's afraid to print an honest newspaper!"

Jane glanced at Frank, then considered the proof sheet he handed her. When she looked up she said enthusiastically: "I think it's splendid, Jim! This kind of writing will wake people up. It will give them the courage to demand decent conditions!"

Jim grinned his satisfaction. "Thanks, sis. But Frank doesn't see it that way at all. He says we shouldn't run it."

"Why do you object to Jim's story?" Jane asked Frank.

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It was a question Frank didn't like to answer. He gave his attention to tamping tobacco into his pipe, and remembering Jim's thinly veiled accusation of cowardice, tried to stomp down the sudden realization that he *was* a coward—that his only objection to this story was prompted by fear of its consequences.

"Maybe I was wrong, Jane," he said finally. "Maybe it's our duty to run it."

"Of course it is!" Jane exclaimed, thoroughly pleased. "You and Jim can accomplish great things in this town if you'll just pull together."

Frank was thinking about that as he stood in the doorway and watched the girl and her brother stroll off down the board sidewalk to their little white house with the picket fence around it. They were, he reflected, the only people in this world who really meant anything to him. Jane was the only girl he had ever loved; and Jim was like a younger brother—a reckless, idealistic brother who needed protection.

When they turned in at the gate, Frank shifted his gaze to the Blue Bull Saloon directly across the street. Over there was the one threat to his happiness—the man who ruled this town with a despot's ruthless brutality. And remembering the story Jim had written, he shivered again. Brett Bronson wouldn't take that challenge sitting down!

The sun still slanted sharply from the sign above the printing office, its deflected light casting a glaring white beam on the saloon stoop. Something in the way that beam burned against the warped boards caught at Frank's mind; it was like a bright beacon, pointing to something. But its significance was too remote; it evaded the grasping fingers of his mind.

THE final copy of the *Bugle* was run off the old Washington hand press at noon the next day. Jim Kenyon wiped perspiration from his smiling face and said proudly: "That's it, Frank! We're really printing a newspaper now!"

Watching a Mexican newsboy go through the Blue Bull's batwings, Frank said, "Reckon we are," and washed up at the water bucket.

"Come on over to the house and we'll celebrate with lunch," Jim said, putting on his coat. "Jane is expecting you."

But Frank shook his head. There was no appetite in him, either for food or celebration.

"I'm not hungry," he muttered. "I'll have a cup of coffee at the lunchroom."

Jim eyed him sharply. "The Bronson story didn't spoil your appetite, did it?"

Frank forced a grin. "Of course not. Tell Jane I'd rather be invited to supper—when I can really do justice to a good meal."

When Jim had gone, Frank picked up a copy of the *Bugle* and scanned the lead story. The bold, black headline seemed to shout at him:

BRETT BRONSON'S BLUFF
IS CALLED

Underneath was a two-line bank which said:

Bugle Demands City Marshal To End
Gambler's Gun Rule

Beneath that was the story:

Latigo's need for law and order was graphically demonstrated Saturday afternoon when Brett Bronson shot and killed Dave Jordan. The bloody execution of this intoxicated cowman occurred in the Blue Bull Saloon and was a shocking exhibition of ruthless, calculating gun skill.

According to eye witnesses, Jordan took exception to Bronson's slick-fingered ma-

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nipulation of the cards, whereupon the gambler deliberately taunted him into going for his gun. So drunk that he could scarcely stand upright, the unfortunate cowman had no chance for his life. His gun was unfired when he died. According to the coroner, Bronson's bullet penetrated Jordan's heart—dead center!

The *Bugle* takes this opportunity to denounce Brett Bronson for the greed-goaded murderer he is, and to demand that the decent citizens of this town appoint a city marshal without further delay. Latigo may be too small to warrant a deputy sheriff being stationed here; but the fact that three men have been killed during the past year proves that we need a peace officer of our own choosing.

Latigo is NOT Brett Bronson's town. It belongs to the people. Appoint a city marshal and drive Bronson's breed out of Latigo!

Frank put down the paper. Jim's story, he reflected, would please a lot of people; but it wouldn't please Brett Bronson. He eased back in his chair and sat for a time remembering how pleasant Latigo had been before Bronson moved into the Blue Bull. There had been two saloons in town then, run by easy-going proprietors who were content with small profits and satisfied customers. But Bronson had bought them both out and now his place was a veritable deadfall for the unwary.

A step sounded in the doorway, and the trivial sound made Frank jump. For a fear-stricken moment, he didn't look up, afraid of facing Bronson. His throat felt dry and hot, and the sweat that dripped down his armpits felt cold as sleet.

Then John Cartwright, owner of the Mercantile, said enthusiastically: "Good work, Frank! I came over to congratulate you on the *Bugle's* stand for civic decency!"

Frank's sigh of relief was like a prayer of thankfulness. He said wryly: "Thanks, John. I'm . . . I'm glad you like it."

DURING the next half hour several citizens dropped into the *Bugle* office, voicing their praise. But because slogging, cold-fingered fear nagged at his vitals, Frank Stonecypher felt no pride in their appreciation. And then, shortly before one o'clock, Brett Bronson sauntered leisurely across Main Street.

Frank saw him, and felt suddenly cold despite the day's brassy heat. He watched the oncoming gambler with an almost hypnotic intensity, seeing the grim scowl on Bronson's beefy face, noting the way the man's gun swayed in its oiled half-breed holster. This, he thought desperately, was the thing he had feared, the thing he had tried to talk Jim into avoiding. And now it was happening—while Jim was away!

Bronson stopped in the doorway, thinly controlled anger putting a ruddy flush on his jowly, pock-pitted face. "I read the story," he declared arrogantly, "and I'm not liking it. Who wrote it?"

Frank sat rigidly in his chair, frozen beyond the power of movement. The thought flashed through his mind that he might save himself by telling this gun-hung gambler that Jim had written the story. The weekly edition was out, and Jim probably wouldn't come back to the office this afternoon—wouldn't have to face this man's menacing eyes. But almost at once he turned that temptation down. Even though he'd be telling the truth, it would be like signing Jim's death warrant, because Jim would accept Bronson's challenge to a gun duel whenever it came.

He said finally, "I wrote it," and watched smoldering rage brighten Bronson's steely eyes.

"There's a stage leaving at five o'clock," the gambler said icily. "If you're here after it leaves, I'm com-

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ing over to ram this gun down your stinking throat. But you won't feel it, because you'll already be dead and drawing flies."

He turned then, and in that instant Frank remembered the gun Jim had put in the desk drawer. It was there now, so close that he could grab it without moving more than his right arm. All he'd have to do was pick it up, call out to Bronson and then shoot the man down when he whirled around.

Frank's fingers dipped into the drawer, fastened on the gun, lifted the weapon and raised it. He opened his lips to call Bronson's name—and knew suddenly that he couldn't go through with this thing. The very thought of blood turned him sick inside; made his hand tremble so that the gun waggled crazily as he put it back into the drawer. Instead of calling to Bronson, he whispered forlornly: "I *am* a coward!"

SLOWLY Frank went down the street to the lunchroom and drank two cups of black coffee. The hot liquid took the shakiness out of his hands, but it didn't thaw the icy knot at the pit of his stomach. And later, as he packed his suitcase in his room on the second floor of the Mansion Hotel, the nervous jitters came back, worse than before.

He lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling of this room which had been home to him for three long and pleasant years. The thought that soon he'd be leaving it forever put a futile regret in him. He would be leaving a lot more than this room when he left Latigo; he'd be leaving the most wonderful girl he had ever known.

He got up, looked around for his pipe and remembered he had left it at the office. He sifted tobacco into rice paper and tried to shape up a cigarette. But his fingers were wet with sweat and they were trembling violently. The paper broke, spilling the tobacco.

Frank threw the paper aside. "Why am I trembling now?" he muttered. "I'm not going to be killed; I'm going to live!"

He stood for a time, gazing absently out the front window. The sun was dropping lower, so that its slanting rays slammed against store fronts at an almost horizontal angle. Looking at his watch, Frank saw that it was nearly stage time. Some spur of rankling regret made him glance at the *Bugle* office. The burnished sign above the door caught the sun's brilliance in a way that made it impossible to read the words, but he knew them by heart:

WEEKLY BUGLE
James Kenyon & Frank Stonecypher
Proprietors

After today there'd be only one name on the sign; a week from now there might be no sign at all.

It occurred to Frank then that leaving Latigo would save his life, but it wouldn't save Jim Kenyon's. Jim would write another story next week, denouncing the partner who had deserted him and the gun rule behind that desertion. Brett Bronson would saunter across Main Street again, and Jim would die!

Frank shook his head, as if to dismiss that stark knowledge from his mind. But it stayed there, and with it came a wave of self-disgust that sickened him to the very core of his being. Vainly he tried to tell himself that he had warned Jim against printing the story, that there was no good reason why he should risk his own life backing Jim's story with bullets. Yet, even then the disgust remained, and he became aware of another emotion—writhing anger.

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It was a strange thing. Frank Stonecypher, whose philosophy had been peace at any price during all the years he could remember, was suddenly hating two men—Brett Bronson and himself! And in that rage-produced moment he realized there was something stronger in life than love, or loyalty or fear; something inside him that he could not run away from!

DELIBERATELY, then, like a man going to certain doom, Frank went downstairs and walked unhurriedly along Main Street's sun-blasted board sidewalk. As he turned into the *Bugle* office, he glimpsed the Tucson stage coming down the street, heard its brakes squeal as it stopped in front of the Wells Fargo station. In another couple of minutes the driver would crack his long whip and the swaying old Butterfield would roll on out of town.

Frank went to the desk, lifted Jim's gun and examined it. There was a snub-nosed slug in each cylinder—six of them. The thought that slugs similar to these would soon be smashing into his body made the muscles of his stomach crawl. But beyond that familiar fear was a new and strange satisfaction that sang inside him like an exultant refrain—the sure knowledge that even a coward could win back a man's most precious heritage—his own self-respect!

The stage rolled on down the street, leaving a plume of sunlit dust behind it. Frank walked to the doorway and stood there, waiting tensely. His face was wet with sweat. But it wasn't cold, now; it was warm, almost hot. There was a peculiar pressure above his eyes, a throbbing pulsation as if a band were tied tightly across his forehead.

Then, as Brett Bronson pushed through the Blue Bull's batwings, something strangely familiar rang a remote signal far back in Frank's brain. For an instant he couldn't identify it; then abruptly he knew what it was and the frantic fingers of his mind clutched at a wild hope. He had seen it once before, the way the *Bugle's* burnished sign reflected sunlight so sharply at the Blue Bull stoop. That brilliant burst of dazzling light would shine directly into Brett Bronson's eyes as he came down the saloon steps. For a split-second it would blind him, and in that fleeting interval an amateur gunman might have a chance!

All this flashed through Frank's mind in the time it took Bronson to come across the saloon stoop, his bushy black hair gleaming blue in the sunlight. Frank felt all his senses draw taut; for a breathless moment he had an almost overwhelming desire to run back into the office, and hard on the heels of that frantic temptation was a panicky urge to swing up his gun and fire now.

But he battled that down, knowing well that he couldn't hit Bronson without taking careful aim—and knowing that the gambler wouldn't give him that chance. Then, as Bronson halted at the top of the steps, Frank held his breath. If Bronson did his shooting from there—

The big gambler called sharply: "Lift your gun, printer!"

So this was it! This was the way a man proved he wasn't a coward—standing here waiting for bullet-blasted death. And he had thought he might have a chance, just an outside chance for one well-aimed shot! If Bronson would only start down those stairs, he would have that chance!

Whereupon Frank Stonecypher

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swallowed the last ragged remnant of his fear. Putting all the pent-up passion of a lifetime into his voice, he shouted angrily: "Come and get me—you murdering coyote!"

That seemed to startle Brett Bronson completely. His thick lips twisted into a scowl and the splayed fingers of his right hand hovered so close to his gun that Frank thought he was already drawing. But the gambler didn't draw; he started slowly down the steps!

FRANK stiffened, all his senses tautly alert. The sign's reflected light was striking Bronson's chest; the next step brought it up to the chin. In another instant it would be full in his face. Frank's fingers tightened on the gun, all his muscles tensed for the desperate play which might be his last conscious act.

He shouted: "Draw, Bronson!" and swung the gun up, taking time to aim it as the gambler grabbed.

Bronson's left hand made a spasmodic gesture to shade his eyes. His right made a short, blurred move, its upward arc showing a shine of gun metal. His shot came first, a sharp, loud blast.

That slug whined so close to Frank's head that it vibrated in his ears. But it didn't spoil his aim. Now that this thing was actually taking place he felt altogether calm, strangely detached. In this tight interval of racing time his perceptions sharpened to fine-honed clarity that made all movement seem suspended, as if in slow motion. Bronson was backing up the steps, trying to dodge away from that blinding beam of light. Frank fired, and knew instantly that he had missed Bronson's face because the gambler had moved up a step.

But Bronson's body jerked backward in a way that told Stonecypher his bullet hadn't entirely missed and that knowledge whipped up a strange sense of satisfaction in him. He laughed a little, deep down in his throat, and deliberately fired again.

The gambler's gun exploded once more. That shot was instantly echoed by a metallic clang above Frank's head and the crazy snarl of a ricocheting slug. Then Bronson sat down with a dead man's foolish grin on his slack-jawed mouth and when Frank fired again, the gunman's body sagged over like a loosely filled sack of grain.

For a long moment a vacuumlike hush hung over Main Street's deep dust. Then Jim Kenyon yelled: "Frank!"

Turning, Frank saw his partner running toward him, with Jane close behind. There was an expression on Jim's face that Frank had never seen there before. It wasn't just amazement; it was a warmer thing, a thing that ran like a lilt in Jim's voice when he spoke.

"Frank—you old fake!" Jim exclaimed, grabbing his partner's arms. "Acting like you were scared when you were a gunslick galoot all the time!"

Jane's face held that same expression of respect. But because she showed no surprise at the thing he had done, it seemed infinitely warmer to Stonecypher—made him forget that he had ever considered leaving this blond-haired girl.

Later, when Frank Stonecypher ate supper with the Kenyons, a blood-red sun hammered Latigo's Main Street with blast-furnace intensity. Its slanting rays struck the metal sign of the *Weekly Bugle* with such dazzling radiance that the dent of Brett Bronson's bullet did not show at all—

THE END.

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Jim Wyatt had tried to outride his powder smoke past, but ruthless renegades of Death Valley's heat-blasted hell pit drove him to seek a

SIX-GUN SALVATION

BY GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

THE trouble would have stopped instantly if Jim Wyatt had merely spoken his name. It was a long way from the cattle towns of Kansas to the mining camps of Death Valley, but Wyatt's name was known. He knew that. He needed only to mention it and the blustering hombre facing him would turn pale, stammer apologies and back off, and the crowd of barroom loafers would sidle out of his way like coyotes slinking out of the path of a grizzly. Instead, their sneering taunts were hurled at him from all parts of the barroom.

"What d'you reckon he's wearin' a gun for—ornament?"

"Looks big enough to take keer of himself."

"Bigger they are, harder they fall."

It was whiskey talk, and the restless hostility of local toughs against any possible new rival coming into their midst. The smart thing for him to do, Wyatt warned himself, was to laugh it off and eat humble pie. Sternly he reminded himself of his resolve to have finished with gun slaughter, once and for all. To let these tinhorn desperadoes stampede him into a gunplay would be reckless and tragic. He had come into Darwin to buy supplies. "Go on about your business, and get out of town," he cautioned himself. "You know what'll happen if you don't."

"I'm waitin'," the burly man opposite him growled. "No ox-footed pilgrim spills my likker without bein' sorry. If he ain't sorry, I *make* 'im sorry. Go on, say it!" He took a menacing step toward Jim, his hand flicking to his holster.

Jim Wyatt's tall, lithe body tensed and his gray eyes blazed with sudden fury. The burly, pock-marked man opposite him had bumped into Jim and spilled a drink. It might have been accidental, but Jim knew enough about gun toughs to suspect it had been intentional. His impulse was to pull his gun and silence the sneering, evil-faced gun-slinger challenging him. It took iron self-control for him to check his hair-trigger temper. But he did check it. For this was exactly the sort of trouble he had hoped to leave behind him in Dodge City.

Jim Wyatt had been peace marshal of Dodge City when the herds of longhorns coming up the trail from Texas had brought gunfightin' fools into Kansas; and from Dodge, he had gone to Tombstone and cleaned up that hell-roarin' camp. Time and again he had faced deadly gunfighters; time and again he had matched speed and aim with men notorious for the swift death they dealt—and, drawing last, had got his own bullet in first. Wyatt knew he could kill this man taunting him now. But that would not end the matter. From then on, his very ex-

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istence would be a challenge for every gun-fighting bully in the territory, just as it had been at Dodge and Tombstone.

For in saloons and around campfires men would talk of his gun prowess. The local gun desperadoes would be ribbed up to match their fighting skill against his. One by one, fired up with whiskey, they would seek him out and provoke him into gun duels. And the more dangerous he proved himself, the more reputation would accrue to the fighter who would eventually beat him. The more men he killed, the more men would seek to kill him. When he'd been marshal of Dodge City, two gunfighters had come all the way from Texas solely to prove they had more guts and skill than Jim Wyatt. They hadn't had. Merely to survive, he would have to fight, and kill, and kill again. With these somber thoughts crowding him, Jim took a step backward.

"Sorry, partner," he said quietly,

The ambusher's shot took Wyatt's mount in the heart and Wyatt knew he might as well be dead as afoot in this merciless furnace.

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his eyes flicking over the man. He tossed a coin onto the bar and called: "Barkeep, fill my friend's glass again." Turning, then, he started out of the saloon.

WYATT'S pulse kicked in concern as he noticed the buzzards. He had rounded Tucki Mountain and was slanting across the tawny middle of Death Valley, headed for the Black Mountains. It was hot, not yet the full heat of summer, but dangerously hot for travel on the Valley floor. He had ridden out of Darwin three days before, his pack mule loaded with supplies, and by nightfall expected to reach his camp in the Black Mountain range.

Looking up, Jim studied that gigantic spiral of buzzards in the air to the south, and wondered if someone was in trouble. In a huge inverted cone, the desert scavengers wheeled and soared against the heat-glazed sky.

Prospectors were numerous in the district. Panamint City was now a ghost town, but the finding of borax in Death Valley in '80, and of gold and silver at Greenwater in '84, had brought a rush of miners, clerks, farmers, lawyers, and even cowmen to prospect for mineral treasure. And Death Valley was no country for greenhorns as spring blazed into summer.

Jim Wyatt turned off the trail and rode along Salt Creek toward the buzzards. Ahead of him the long, tawny basin sloped down toward the blinding-white alkali of the salt sinks on the Valley bottom. Just at the nearest edge of white, Jim saw something black that seemed to move.

It *was* moving! A man's figure crawling on hands and knees! The buzzards were following him, swooping close, alighting to watch, their red wattled heads hideous in the sun glare. As Wyatt reached the man, the vultures launched clumsily into flight.

Jim dismounted and, bending over the crawling figure, held out his canteen. "Here, partner, drink just a little," he said, laying a gentle hand on the man's shoulder.

But the hombre was too far gone to hear. He was young, thin, towheaded. His shirt was torn off, and he clawed into the sand in a mad, instinctive groping for water. His body was burned by the sun and parched by heat until his tongue was swollen and black; his bloodshot eyes glared insanely. He collapsed as Wyatt tried to help him stand. Wyatt mopped the youngster's face with his dampened neckerchief, and poured a little water between his cracked lips. Then he carried the lad into the shade of a cutbank, and rubbed his sunburned chest and back with the wet cloth.

Gradually the young fellow came around. He was looking at Wyatt now with understanding in his blue eyes. "I . . . I been through hell," he breathed weakly. "Guess I'd be feedin' buzzards now if you hadn't come along."

"You're all right, now," Jim assured him with a friendly grin. "Where were you headed?"

"Darwin. I got a shack in Furnace Creek Wash. Ran out of grub."

"You *walkin'* to Darwin?" Jim exclaimed in amazement. "It's nigh fifty miles!"

"It's walk or starve," the kid smiled wryly. "Piutes killed and ate my hoss."

"Look, partner," Jim offered. "I just laid in supplies. I'll lend you some. My own camp is in the Black Mountains, and I can go by way of Furnace Creek. I'll just take you

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back to your shack. All right?"

The gratitude on the youngster's face embarrassed Wyatt. "Gosh, you . . . you've saved my life twice over."

Hastily Wyatt changed the subject. "Havin' any luck on your claim?"

The young fellow's face tightened. "Not yet," he said gloomily.

"Well," Jim offered encouragement, "men hunt a long time for gold."

"But I ain't huntin' gold or silver—or borax, either. I'm lookin' for water."

Wyatt stared, and grinned, his smile surprisingly warm on his lean, iron-hard face. "Well, at that, water's more precious and a damn sight harder to find than gold, in this country."

"Not for me. I got a gift. I'm a water diviner. Give me a hazel switch, or even a forked willow branch, and I'll find water."

"Not where there ain't any," Wyatt said, dryly.

ON across the Valley floor into Furnace Creek Wash he took young Russell Dade. And as they rode, Wyatt grimly estimated how much chance the youngster would have had to reach Darwin before heat, thirst and hunger finished him. About as much chance as a cottontail rabbit in a den of timber wolves. As they rode, young Dade talked. His claim was in the Wash, through which a lot of prospectors traveled. His idea was to develop a flowing well and have water to sell. Also, to irrigate an alfalfa patch, a truck garden, and an orchard. He'd sell fruit and vegetables, meals too, maybe.

"You got a girl, huh?" Wyatt asked.

"Why, y-yeah, in San Bernardino. Soon's my well's flowin' water and I make a little stake, we'll get married. Look, Mr.—"

"Just call me Jim."

"You got water on your claim, Jim?" the youngster asked eagerly. "I'll find a well for you! Honest! I just walk along holdin' a forked branch in my hands, and when I'm over water the branch dips down and pulls so hard sweat pops out on my head—" He quit talking with a gasp of exhaustion.

Wyatt looked concernedly at him. Young Dade's face was white and drawn from the exertion of riding. "It won't be long now, kid." Jim's voice was solicitous. "Just hang on a while longer."

The sun had set in a riot of ruby and gold behind the Panamints by the time Jim and young Russell turned up into Furnace Creek Wash. Up a yellow alluvial fan grown with mesquite and arrow weed they rode, into the shallow canyon that rare cloudbursts turned into a foaming gorge. Up ahead, Russell said, was his claim and his shack. Then he gave a startled exclamation. "Look, Jim! Somebody's there!"

Jim followed his direction, and up ahead saw the glow of a big campfire. A party of five men were camped around it in the little side gulch in which Russell had built his shack of slabs of yellow rock. There was no wood to be had in the canyon, and the men were splitting the plank door of the shack to pieces to feed the fire. The chairs and table and cupboard, which young Russell had carefully made of boxes and timber cut high up the mountain slope, had already been stamped into pieces and fed to the blaze.

"Hey!" Russell yelled, his voice a hoarse gasp. "That's my house! Blast you, you can't d-do that!" He

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practically fell off Wyatt's pack mule and lunged toward the vandals at a tottering run.

"Take it easy. We'll pay for it," one hombre drawled.

"Sure," another called out. "For some old boxes and chunks of pine wood, I'd say about two bits." He flung a coin at Russell's feet, guffawing.

Sobbing, Russell swung his fist at the man, but he was too weak to hold his balance, and fell forward against him. The man lashed out and struck young Dade hard behind the ear, knocking him sprawling on his face in the dirt.

Then Jim Wyatt was between them, bending over the youngster. He picked him up and turned to face the stranger.

"Maybe you'd like some of the same, hombre," the man grated at Jim.

"Out of the way." Jim's voice was cold. "This boy's nigh dead from thirst."

The man started to argue, but moved aside as Jim's gray eyes measured him with a steely glint more menacing than words. Jim carried the youngster into the shack and laid him on a straw-filled bunk. Outside, he heard the men talking, low-voiced.

"Say, I've seen that big yellow-haired jasper before. He's the hombre Snipe Jackson made backwater in the Nugget Saloon Monday night."

"Looks like he just made Pete backwater," another voice broke in.

"Like hell! I can take on two like him any day," the man called Pete defended himself.

Suddenly there was a commotion behind the shack. Then a sixth man came striding into the firelight, carrying something in his hands that squawked and fluttered.

"Chickens, by damn!" he exclaimed. "Just banties, but better'n beans and pork. Pete, help me wring their necks."

Bantam chickens? Jim's forehead creased in a puzzled frown. The boy had said he'd run out of grub and had started walking to Darwin to get food, Jim reflected. That could mean just one thing: The bantams were the boy's pets! He had preferred to starve rather than kill them. Had been saving them as the start of a flock. And now—

A towering fury of rage flaring within him, Wyatt whirled out of the shack and with swift, purposeful strides came toward the two men with the chickens.

The man called Pete faced him, hand near gun butt. "Maybe you got objections, hombre? Maybe," Pete grated, "that gun you wear's got bullets in it, not jelly beans?"

Jim Wyatt's racing mind had already outlined a plan of battle: he had but five bullets in his gun and six men to face—with a quick chop of his .45 he'd knock Pete senseless, trigger a slug at each of the two men crouched by the fire, catch Pete as the latter collapsed, and hold him as a shield as he whirled to face the other three men. The hombre holding the chickens would be slow to draw, and likely he'd drop him. By that time, the two by the waterhole would be shooting, and—

The waterhole! Jim stood transfixed. Water was flowing in a slow, gurgling out-pouring from the earth. The youngster's dry well had come in! Young Dade had found water! Tapped underground springs. Maybe brought in an artesian well. And out here water was gold, flowing gold, white flowing gold! The thought was like a cool, firm hand on Jim Wyatt's headlong fighting fury. He paused. Reminded

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himself of his encounter in the Darwin saloon, and how he had swallowed his anger then, and *why* he had side-stepped gunplay. His chest lifted to a deep, unsteady breath.

"No," he said softly, answering Pete's question. "I got no objections."

Pete laughed curtly, a sneering lift to his lips. "You ought to live long, hombre—if a jackrabbit don't bite you."

That was funny. The miners guffawed loudly, repeating it: "Yes, sir. If a jackrabbit didn't bite 'im! Haw!"

Jim ignored them and went to get a dipper of water for young Russell.

THE miners didn't stay long. After eating, and resting an hour, they moved on. They were headed for the strike at Greenwater, and were traveling by night to escape the heat.

Wyatt unloaded part of his supplies and stowed them away in the shack. Then he built a little wall of rock and mud as a catch basin around the flowing well. When he heard young Russell stirring restlessly on his bunk, he woke the youngster.

"Your well's come in, boy. Runnin' water. Want to go out and look at it?"

Russell, his legs still a little wobbly, went outside. When he saw the water, he gasped in unbelieving joy. Now he'd plant his alfalfa patch and have a truck garden! He'd raise chickens and sell meals. By golly, he was rich! He'd mark off lots, because now a town would start up here! Miners and freighters would make his place a stop-over point.

Abruptly, then, he stopped. Lips quivering, he stared at the pile of chicken feathers and picked bones around the campfire. Dismay and defeat in his words, he blurted: "Guess I'm j-just daydreamin'. It won't work. If a bunch of roughneck miners come along, what's to prevent 'em from just takin' the grub and water they want, without payin' for it? Like those hombres did. Why didn't you stop 'em, Jim?"

Jim Wyatt, his face expressionless, turned toward his horse. "Time I started ridin' for my own camp, boy."

"I didn't even have a gun. But *you* got a gun!" the youngster continued distractedly. "Course it wasn't no hide off your back. Guess you'd've just got yourself killed for nothin'. I'm goin' to get me a gun. Darn quick! Even if it is just invitin' murder!"

Low-voiced, Wyatt said: "So long, kid." And departed.

Next day, Jim Wyatt found his bonanza. It wasn't water, and it wasn't gold. It was borax—and not the ordinary "cotton-ball" deposits of the marsh crusts, but colemanite. In this country, borax is found only in Oregon, Nevada and California, and it fetches high prices. So it paid to refine the borax crusts of the salt marshes by an evaporating process that was slow, expensive, and yielded a second-rate product. It even paid to haul the stuff over one hundred and fifty miles of heat-accursed desert to the rail head at Mojave. Though it was an expensive job to get borax to market, prices were so high that practically every salt marsh in the district had a borax plant in operation by it, making money.

Jim Wyatt had found a borax deposit beside the Amargosa River weeks ago, but a marsh deposit wasn't what he was looking for. He had the vision to see that a huge output of inferior borax was going to

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change the situation. The price of borax would fall and most borax miners would go broke.

Jim Wyatt wasn't searching the salt sinks for borax; he was searching the mountain ranges above the ancient lake beds. He had the theory that the borax deposits in the marshes were secondary deposits. Stuff that had been washed from larger deposits or borate of lime in the hills above the marshes, like gold dust and nuggets that have been washed into stream beds from a vein in the canyon walls. Jim was hunting for a sort of "mother lode" of the borax.

And that was what he found. In Tertiary Lake sediments high on the mountain wall at the north end of the Black Range, he found bedded deposits of borate of lime. Pulse kicking as if he were in the grip of a fever, he took samples, crushed the mineral, applied test chemicals, then touched a match to it. As a flame took life, the identifying flame that burned green, the fire of hope and excitement within him blazed high, too.

"I've got it! It's here like I thought!" he exulted.

The next few days he spent working out the size and extent of the beds of colemanite in order to fix the limits of the mineral claim he would file on. Returning to his camp one evening, he found Russell Dade in the little box canyon, cooking supper.

"I been feelin' kind of blue and lonesome; and thought I'd come see you," Russell explained.

"Glad to have you, boy!" Wyatt said, and meant it. Though ordinarily a close-mouthed hombre, his bonanza discovery caused a pent-up excitement within him, and he needed someone to let off steam on. Eating supper, he told young Russell of his find.

"But why," Russell asked, "is your vein of colemanite any better than borax from a marsh?"

"Because there's a lot more of it, it's a sight purer, and a darn sight easier to work," Jim explained. "Y'see, if the price of borax falls, men producing it at a high cost will have to go out of business. My costs will be low. I'll make big money when other operators go broke. I got a real bonanza!" Wyatt grinned. "Heck, I'm sure talkin' big— But how're things with you, lad?"

Russell shrugged, his thin, sunburned face worried. "My well's flowing fine. I got my shack fixed up and I'm irrigatin' a sizable patch of garden. But—Jim," he blurted, "I'm scared!"

"What of?"

"Lots of outlaws are driftin' into this country. Hard-up miners're just as bad. How do I know I won't be robbed blind every time I get somethin' ahead?"

"Look, boy. I got a rifle I ain't usin'. If you'll rest easier for havin' it, take it along with you," Wyatt urged.

"Thanks a lot, Jim. That might help. But," young Dade continued moodily, "what I wish is that I could find a bonanza, sell it, and go home!"

BY noon next day Jim Wyatt had finished posting his location notices on his mineral claim. That done, he walked on up higher into the range. He had left his pack mule in a grassy gulch high in the range where a spring bubbled out of the ground.

At the spring, he filled his canteens and, mounting the mule, started back down the trail. He would break camp this evening, he

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was thinking, and start tonight for Darwin to file on his claim at the land and mining office.

He kicked the mule into a faster pace. The mule didn't like it, for the sun was blazing hot. Off to the west, the mountain range sloped down in ridges of barren, heat-blasted rock to the vast sink of the lowest hell pit on the American continent. And to the east lay the tawny Amargosa Desert. It was a tough country, Wyatt mused. Heat-accursed. Lonely. A land tortured and twisted and set on edge by volcanic fires from within and burned bare and brown by solar fires from above. But it had its treasures to bestow on men tough enough to live in it.

As though to bear out Jim's thoughts, a spurt of smoke suddenly whipped from a cedar clump beside the trail, a report lashed hard and flat in the hot, dry air. Wyatt's mule lunged, catapulting him from the saddle. Jim struck the ground heavily, crumpling against a boulder. Sun and heat and distance were lost in the blackness that engulfed his senses.

The sun blazing into his face brought Wyatt around to consciousness again. He sat up and groaned, for his skull felt as if an iron clapper swung wildly within it. How long he had lain senseless he had no way of knowing. Sight of his pack mule lying dead on the trail reminded him of the gunman who'd shot him from ambush.

Jim Wyatt started down the high ridge trail, worried and angry. Far below he saw a man on his colemanite claim, and judging from the hombre's slim build and his bare tow-colored head, he knew it was young Russell Dade. Even as Wyatt stared, squinting against the sun, he saw the kid leave the claim and start on down toward Wyatt's camp in the little box canyon. Wyatt shouted, but the trail below curved under the overhang of a cliff, and Dade was lost to sight and out of range of possible hearing.

At an unsteady run, Wyatt hurried on down-trail. Presently he saw Dade mounted on a horse come out of his camp, down below. Jim had left his saddle horse tethered in the box canyon—and young Dade was stealing it! He was starting down toward the Valley at a fast clip! Wyatt yelled, even triggered his gun, but it was useless, for Dade was around a bend in the trail, out of sight.

Reaching his colemanite claim, Jim Wyatt ran straight to the stake on which he had posted his location notice. He found a written notice there, all right. But it wasn't his notice. The name on this location notice was not James Wyatt, but *Russell Dade!*

"He's jumpin' my claim, the blasted little thief!" Into Wyatt's mind flashed the words the boy had spoken last night: *"Wish I could find a bonanza, sell it, and go home!"*

On foot, Jim Wyatt started for Darwin. If he had been in a mood to think clearly at all, he would have gone to Greenwater to hire a saddle horse. But the furious anger raging in him drove him on down-trail in a break-neck rush. He'd catch up with the little thief, somehow. And when he did—

The trail led him through Furnace Creek Wash, past the wide ravine in which young Dade had homesteaded. Sight of the neat shack and garden, and the catch basin of fine cool water from the flowing well, set off a blazing fury of retaliation in Wyatt.

In the stone hut he found a keg half full of blasting powder, which

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Dade had been using in clearing a roadway to his place. Working fast, Jim wrecked the flowing well with a blast of powder that caved in the hole, crumpling the strata and blocking the flow of water, plugging it tight. With another detonation, Wyatt avalanched part of the canyon wall behind the stone house down in a roaring thunder of destruction, burying the house and smashing the furniture and supplies within it. The slide of rock swept on to cover part of young Dade's new garden with debris. Long months of sweating, slaving toil had built up the homestead; ten seconds of blazing destruction wiped it out of existence.

ON across the tawny sink of Death Valley, on the trail to Darwin, Jim Wyatt trudged in a dogged, hurried stride. Late at night he reached the Harmony Borax Works. There he borrowed a saddle horse. Not pausing to sleep or rest, he pushed on across the Valley and up into Emigrant Wash. At dawn he delayed for a scant half-hour to rest his horse. Then on he rode after Russell Dade, on across the Panamints, goading his mount to a killing pace. It was too fast a pace in the blazing heat, and the bronc gave out as Wyatt reached the floor of Panamint Valley.

Here he met a party of prospectors headed for Death Valley. From them he bought another horse—and he asked: "Seen a slim, tow-headed hombre headed for Darwin?"

"Yeah, sure enough. Passed us two-three hours back."

On across Panamint Valley Wyatt rode, pressing his horse to its limit. But he did not catch up with young Dade, and he found no sign of the youngster as he rode up into the Argus Range by the Zinc Hill Road. Finally Wyatt came out onto the plateau above Darwin Wash, and tore into Darwin itself—still with no sign of young Dade.

In front of the mining recorder's office Wyatt flung off his bronc, and strode inside. Russell Dade wasn't there. A tall, lantern-jawed hombre with gray hair and keen, kindly eyes, sat at a desk.

Hoarsely Jim Wyatt demanded: "Has a tow-headed young fellow been in here to record a claim?"

"Sure has."

"Name of Russell Dade?"

"Le'me see." The recorder thumbed through a book. "Said he had a colemanite claim over in the Black Mountains. Yeah, here it is. Dade. Russell Dade. Lookin' for 'im?"

"I am," Wyatt grated. "Where is he?"

"Fool kid," the recorder chuckled. "Wanted to know if he could file a claim in another man's name. I told 'im the claim had to be filed in the same name as was on the location notices."

"In another man's name?" Wyatt echoed hollowly.

"So he arranged for a transfer," the recorder continued. "I fixed up the papers for 'im, but 'fore he could sign, he dropped."

"What d'you mean, dropped?"

"He was damn near bled white, I guess. He had a bullet hole in 'im. Through the chest."

"Where is he? Quick, man! Where is he?" Jim's voice was hoarse.

"At the Whitney Hotel, in bed, with Doc Carr tendin' 'im."

Jim Wyatt turned to rush out, then hesitated.

"Say, who was he goin' to transfer that claim to?"

"To a felluh named Wyatt," the

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recorder said. "Jim Wyatt, it was. Know 'im?"

But Jim was already gone.

"A sec, Jim," Russell Dade explained, "I saw those hombres skulkin' around—y' know, the men who burned my door and furniture for firewood that night. I saw one of 'em follow you up the mountain, while the rest of 'em went to your colemanite claim. They tore up your location notice, and left a new one in its place. I waited till they were gone, then I looked at the location notice and saw it was made out to Pete Harney.

"I had enough savvy to realize those hombres would ride to Darwin to file notice on your claim and steal it that way. I didn't know exactly what to do. I didn't dare wait for you to come back, because by that time those claim jumpers 'u'd have a long head start for Darwin on you. So I filled out another location notice in my own name. I took your horse and rode like hell, hopin' to get to Darwin in time to file on your claim ahead of those thieves."

"How'd you get shot?" Wyatt demanded.

The youngster's haggard face turned sheepish. "I rode smack into 'em, like a blame' fool. You know the waterhole in Emigrant Wash, 'round the first bend? I came ridin' hellity-larrup around the turn, and there was the whole bunch of thieves, sittin' around a big campfire. They recognized me and yelled for me to stop. I didn't, so they killed my bronc. I got throwed, but I dodged off into the brush. Couple of 'em came huntin' me, but not too hard—afraid I had a gun, maybe.

"After a while, I sneaked close. Jumped onto one of their broncs and lit out. They shot at me, this time. Hit me, too. But I'm light, and I had a good hoss, so I got away. But I felt bad. I tied myself onto the bronc. Gosh, Jim, I don't remember much of that ride! But I fin'lly got to Darwin, and I beat those claim jumpers to the recorder's office! Say, Jim. We got to transfer that claim to your name."

"It'll wait. Look, boy. Did those hombres come on to Darwin?"

"Did they! Doc Carr says they came trompin' into the recorder's office while I was bein' carried out."

"Yeah," put in the doctor. "When they realized the boy had beat 'em, their jaws dropped clear to their belt buckles."

"Lad," Jim Wyatt asked, "who are those hombres?"

"Pete Harney, Snipe Jackson, fellow name of Barr, and two brothers,

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Sime and Luther Perry. And a Mex, name of Perez."

"Six of 'em jumped you, huh? Six to one," Wyatt murmured.

He stood up from the chair beside the young fellow's cot.

"Where you goin', Jim?"

"Out to give some hombres a little lesson in arithmetic."

Muscles corded tight about his mouth, grim purpose in his towering stride, Jim Wyatt left the hotel. In his mind was a dazing, heart-wrenching vision of a hut patiently built of stone slabs, and of a vegetable garden laid out with toilsome care, all smashed and buried under an avalanche. Of a flowing well of fine sweet water caved in and choked by a thunderous blast of black powder.

Wyatt stopped at a hardware store. He already wore a .45 in a holster on his right thigh. But he bought a second gun. Strapped it on, and tied the holster down. Then he strode into the Nugget Saloon. It was after supper and the place was crowded. Wyatt's keen eyes swept the room. White spots of tension settled about his lean nostrils as he saw Pete Harney and the rest of the claim jumpers. All were here.

Harney and Snipe Jackson stood at the bar and just beyond them stood the Perry brothers. Joe Barr and the Mexican sat at a table. Wyatt strode to the bar.

"Look who's here, Snipe," Pete Harney growled, a twisted grin on his heavy-jowled face.

"Uh-huh. The hombre who don't drink nothin' but milk," Snipe snickered.

"Bartender," Jim Wyatt said, "a glass of milk."

"Don't serve no milk."

"Water will do."

"Only water 'round here is the dish water."

"That'll suit 'im fine," Snipe Jackson put in.

"Yes," Wyatt said quietly. "Dish water will be just right."

The barkeep slopped a glass of greasy water onto the bar in front of Wyatt. He grasped it in his left hand.

"Harney," Jim said, "you're a thievin' claim jumper." His voice was low, but his words carried. Almost instantly a sudden, deathly quiet gripped the room. "Either you or one of your partners shot at me from ambush. All six of you jumped a kid who didn't even have a gun on him—and he still raced you into Darwin and beat you. It's my considered opinion that all six of you hombres put together haven't the guts and decency of one mangy polecat!"

"Who the hell are you to make talk like that!" Pete Harney blustered, stepping back from the bar, hand near his gun butt.

"My name," Jim said, "is Wyatt. James Wesley Wyatt."

Harney's jaw dropped, his Adam's apple bobbed in a gulp of panic, his fleshy face went white. And Snipe Jackson stiffened in sudden awful realization. Abruptly the bystanders at the bar swirled in a rush for the far wall, out of bullet line. Sime Perry and his brother Luther edged off to the left of Harney and Jackson, and stood taut. And beyond them, Joe Barr and Perez rose from their table and stood spraddle-legged, ready. For they knew now what faced them. They knew, all of them, that bluff was out and bluster was futile. Here was a showdown.

Pete Harney jerked a glance around at his partners. He saw they were ready, and bit his lip in sudden reckless resolve. But Jim Wyatt touched off the explosion of action

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by flinging the full glass of greasy dish water full in Harney's face.

"Get 'im!" Harney shouted, his face contorted with rage.

Guns leaped from holsters, bullets reached for Wyatt in lance gusts of fire. But his weapons were already kicking in his fists. Pete Harney crumpled back against the bar, his gun blazing into the floor. Snipe Jackson stiffened convulsively, his slower weapon but half drawn, and slumped in a heap.

A bullet smashed into Jim Wyatt's shoulder, staggering him sideways, and as he lurched, a slug creased his throat and a bullet gashed his thigh. But already Sime Perry was collapsing, Jim's bullet in his heart, and his brother Luther, right arm bullet-slashed from wrist to elbow, dropped his gun to the floor. The Mexican, Perez, had dropped back of a table for shelter, and shot over it. Wyatt's bullets first knocked the gun from his fist in a ringing clang of lead on steel, and then smashed into his shoulder, knocking him howling to the floor. Joe Barr just quit. Flung his gun aside and reached for the ceiling with both arms and bawled: "I quit, Wyatt! Don't shoot!"

Jim Wyatt sat by Russell Dade's cot as Doc Carr dressed his shoulder.

Young Dade said: "Jim, the mining recorder is comin' over here with the papers, and I'll transfer your claim back to you."

"No," Jim said. "I found the claim. You saved it. So we'll go partners. We'll sell it and share the proceeds, fifty-fifty. You'll be able to buy four-five thousand acres of the best damn farm land you could wish for, lad, and still have enough cash to start raisin' a family. Sound good to you?"

"It s-sounds swell," young Russell gasped. "B-but, Jim! Why you sellin' out? I thought you wanted to work the claim yourself?"

Jim Wyatt's lean, hard face tightened. "No, boy. I got to move on. Some place where men don't wear guns. Los Angeles, I guess."

"Oh." Russell looked at the bandage Doc Carr was putting on Wyatt's shoulder, and pointed. "Jim, ain't you goin' to tell me? Did you have a fight?"

"I ran into the Harney gang, lad," Jim replied grimly. "We exchanged opinions on a matter of arithmetic."

"Gosh, Jim! You tangled with that outfit—six to one odds against you! Th-that was dangerous!"

"When," said Doc Carr, "the one is a man and the six are polecats, odds of *one to six* are dangerous, too!"

THE END.

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"It's that range dick and his pard!" Apache yelled. He pulled his guns, but Ganson's move was even worse—he jerked out a knife to cut the pulley ropes!

GUN HOGS ROOT in Hell

BY ED EARL REPP

Only by offering himself as bait to those monstrous Devil Wolves could Frosty Flagg hope to trap the invisible fiend who was sending that unholy pack to ravage Piute Basin.

CHAPTER I

PHANTOM KILLERS

FROSTY FLAGG was sprawled loosely in the barber's chair, snowy lather cloaking his lean jaws, when the two riders fogged by the open door of the shop and reined down somewhere nearby beyond his angle of vision. Excited yells sheared the clatter of stomping hoofs. Frosty swore as the barber's hand jumped nervously and razor steel nicked his ear.

"Keep a dally on that Dixie stiletto, Whiskers!" he clipped tersely. "I came here for a shave—not to have my throat cut!"

The bullet-headed barber was apologetic and dabbed at the cut

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with a wet towel. "Sorry, friend," he said. "Them rannihans gave me a start. Rusada town's got to be a mighty poor place these days for a man with nerves."

"Then you ought to quit shavin' folks an' go punch cows," Frosty complained. "What's goin' on out yonder?"

"It was a couple of Brill Ganson's riders," the barber said, frowning. He stepped quickly to the door to squint against the glare of the sun that beat up from the white-washed fronts of Rusada's squatty adobe stores. "Looks like they— Well, trim me for a pilgrim if them ain't corpses tied behind their kaks!"

Frosty was on his feet in a jiffy and craning his neck over the other's shoulder. His smoky gray eyes, hard as crockery, pinched on the scene down the street.

The riders had lit down in front of Brill Ganson's two-story livery stable and feed barn and were untying the heavy objects behind their cantles. Frosty's tension left him when he saw what they really were.

"Those aren't bodies," he said flatly. "They're rolled-up hides an' plenty fresh." He chuckled, an amused sound that masked the ferretlike sharpness of his interest. "What kind of a town is this that a man thinks he's made news when he skins out a couple of cow critters?"

Lafe Gilroy, the barber, thoughtfully scratched behind his ear with the end of his razor. "You'll get wise if you stay here long enough," he muttered. "Them hides might turn out to be hairy dynamite. If they got 'em up Bitter Creek way, I'll bet my shop some yahoo'll be cold fruit on a cottonwood tree before night!"

"How you figger that?" Frosty blinked. His pale eyes held only the puzzlement of a stranger. It was that disarming innocence of his coppery young features that made him the most successful range detective on the Cattlemen's Association payroll.

Gilroy glanced about him nervously before replying. "Ever hear of the Devil Wolves?" he asked guardedly.

Frosty thought a minute. "No, don't reckon I have," he lied glibly.

"You will if you hang around Piute Basin long enough," the other volunteered. "The Devil Wolves are a pack of critters spawned right in hell. For six months they've been slaughterin' cattle by the score. A night-ridin' puncher got drug right off his hoss an' kilt by 'em last month. Now them red-eyed killers have taken to rustlin' cows!"

Flagg allowed a disarming grin to curve his fine lips, exposing teeth as white as the lather drying on his face. "Barbers are great ones to hooraw a stranger with fancy yarns, ain't they?" he chuckled. "I suppose these educated lobos ride hosses an' wear ten-gallon hats, eh?"

Gilroy took the bait.

"Right under the eyes of the night crews they slip in, git the herds on the run an' chouse 'em into the cedar brakes above Bitter Creek," he explained. "Ain't a cow been recovered yet, out of three hundred they've ran off. I know it sounds plumb foolish but it's the truth. Brill Ganson—that's him comin' out of the stable now, the one with the red face an' the black hat—claims young Curt Donahue has cards in the game. Says his skinny little two-bit spread couldn't have lasted this long without he was augmentin' his own beef with fresh stuff wearin' blotchy brands. But me, I only say what I hear. Understand?"

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Frosty nodded and watched men charging from stores, saloons and alleys to gather around the two punchers who had now flopped the hides out flat in the street. Brill Ganson's heavy voice broke like a thunderclap over the tumult: "Stand back and let a man through!" and he started elbowing his way roughly through the crowd to his men. "What you got there, Dobe?"

The puncher turned to him and indicated the hides. Frosty could tell by the way the barber had quieted that he'd said his piece. Men of the razor-and-shears breed never ceased talking until they'd told all they knew anyway. That was why the young brand inspector's first move on reaching a strange town was always to get a shave.

With a feigned absent-mindedness he pulled off the polka-dot apron from from his blocky shoulders and wiped his face. "Thanks for the interestin' gossip, Whiskers," he said. "See you later." He left the shop to saunter down the boardwalk to hear what he could hear.

But as he walked with the unhurried step of a saddle-bred man, his mind was plunging along at top speed. He was thinking he'd better get to the crowd and have a first-hand look at those hides. Word of what was happening in Piute Basin had leaked out gradually to the Association.

He had smiled at the fantastic yarn of the long-looping Devil Wolves at first. Prime beef driven off their ranges by wild dogs, never to reappear by so much as hide, hair or hoof, was too much to believe. But at last complaints from members in the Association caused him to be sent here to investigate. And judging by what he had heard and seen, and adding his own deductions to the total, he realized there was more to the fantastic yarns than appeared on the surface.

BIG Brill Ganson was hunkered down by the spread hides when Frosty made his way to the fore of the muttering crowd. Dobe, a yellow-haired puncher with a mouthful of broken teeth, stood smugly beside him, his face twisted in a smirking smile. Ganson's heavy index finger traced over the brand that was slightly blurred by the ravages of weather on the hide. Then he looked up at Dobe.

"It's a Triangle G all right!" he rasped. "My brand—my beef! Where'd you find it?"

Frosty studied the cruel face of the big man and decided he didn't like it, nor the sooty black eyes that were close set on each side of a hawklike nose and seemed to glitter with minute jets of fire. His skin was firm but florid and tough as leather over his massive jowels. He wore a range hat of black, unborn burro skin. To Frosty's way of thinking, his pin-stripe trousers and fancy shirt were too well kept for a hard-working rancher or livery proprietor. Ganson was the type of man who would rather sit and plan, like a spider in a dim corner, than get out and let men see his cards face up.

"Found 'em just where we reckoned we would," Dobe announced. "In the reservoir on Curt Donahue's place! That other hide's from a Bradded M critter." His wolfish features crinkled. "Reckon Cherry Michaels will be plumb put out to find he's been slow-elkin' her beef, too!"

Ganson rose ponderously erect, towering well above all other heads. He looked solemnly about the ring of faces surrounding him. "You boys know what this means?" he

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breathed with hot anger that Frosty thought was a bit forced.

It was Dobe's partner who answered. He was small, chunky, with gimlet eyes and greasy skin. Frosty had heard a man call him Apache and decided he fitted the name.

"Means Donahue's gettin' his share o' the beef you an' the rest've been losin'," he smirked.

Ganson's huge head swung in a sage nod. "Right," he bit out. "Gents, I reckon this clears up the Devil Wolves legend. Mebbeso you'll listen to me now. Ain't I been sayin' all along that young longlooper, Donahue, was back of it all? How about you, Martin? Still standin' up for him?"

He stabbed his finger at a burly, sad-faced man clad in range garb.

"Damned if I can figger it out," Poke Martin said morosely. "Curt's a nice young feller, even if he is stubborn as a Missouri mule. Honest as the day is long, is what I allus said. I can't understand it."

"Can't, eh?" Ganson snorted. "Well, I can! Listen to me, you droop-lidded dogies. A year ago Curt Donahue was mortgaged to the hilt on his land. Last week I learned he'd paid the whole loan off! How'd he do it? His land's too pore to fatten a herd of gophers, let alone a hundred steers. He ain't got but one pony to his name."

His dead black eyes roved arrogantly over the watching faces.

"*Donahue's the Devil Wolf!* He's fostered the legend to cover his own rustling. Some way he's stealin' our stock and selling it across the border. How else did he get money to pay off a mortgage when the rest of us are hangin' on by the skin of our eyeteeth?"

A squatty little cattleman beside Poke Martin boldly captured Ganson's gaze. Later, Frosty learned he was Dave Allen, Cherry Michaels' segundo.

"I can tell you how he's made money, Ganson," he drawled. "By workin' his fool head off up there in the cedar brakes. Shore he's crazy—you're right there. Refusin' our offers to buy his land for its water rights when the land ain't no good for nothin'. Time and ag'in I've seen him up in the meadows his cattle can't get to, cuttin' grass with a scythe and draggin' it down for fodder. He's made money because he'll sweat blood to make that spread pay."

Ganson permitted a sarcastic smile to ease the set of his beefy lips.

"But that don't explain how these hides got in his reservoir," he growled pointedly.

Frosty Flagg, squatting unobtrusively beside the hides at Ganson's feet, frowned to himself. He was on the point of standing to confront the cattleman when hoofbeats throbbed on the noonday air and all heads turned toward the girl who curbed her mount at the edge of the throng.

CHAPTER II

RANGELAND PARIAH

"CHERRY MICHAELS!" Poke Martin grunted. "This'll hit the pore kid right betwixt the eyes."

Frosty watched the girl come through the crowd of strangely silent men, and he knew a warm tug of admiration for her. She looked clean and strong, in the way the desert embodied those qualities—unspoiled, quick to change from sunlight to storm. She was lithe and walked with easy grace. Her lips were rich against tanned cheeks. The faraway blue of rain-washed skies was in her eyes.

Cherry stopped beside Dave Allen, her foreman and said, "Dave,

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Gilroy says something has been found on the Devil Wolves at last. What—" Her eyes went wide at the sight of the wet hides. "What are those doing here?" she finished queerly.

"Those," Brill Ganson smirked, "are going to put the hemp around somebody's neck, if I have my way. One of 'em is off one of your cows. The other used to keep the wind from whistling through the ribs of a cow of mine. Dobe and Apache found 'em both at the bottom of Curt Donahue's reservoir."

Silence claimed the group, while eyes strayed self-consciously from Cherry Michaels' white features.

"That's not true!" the girl breathed. "Poke—where did these hides come from?"

Poke scratched the back of his leg with the toe of his other boot. "He's right," he mumbled miserably.

There was more silence after that. And Frosty Flagg knew by the signs how it was between Cherry and Curt Donahue. It wasn't an uncommon situation, that of a girl with money in love with a poor man, and the poor man returning her love. But he probably had his pride, Frosty

"If you think you can take me in on such a frame-up," Curt snapped, "come ahead and try!"

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told himself, so a little matter of a bank account eternally stood between them.

The girl turned suddenly blazing eyes upon Brill Ganson.

"You'd like to see him lynched, wouldn't you?" she burst out. "What have you against him, Ganson? Why do you want to ruin him so much?"

"I had nothing against Donahue until this!" Ganson answered briefly, nodding at the hides. "What do you expect when he's shown up as the one who's rustled us all into the poorhouse, including you?"

"That isn't proof. Someone could have dumped the hides there without his knowing it."

"It's proof enough for me," Ganson grunted sourly. "It's clear as day he butchered those beefs for his own use and tried to hide the evidence. No point in anybody planting those hides on his place."

"Just a minute."

It was a voice that hadn't been raised in the argument before, that of the tall, lean, sun-blackened young puncher who had been examining the hides. Frosty Flagg went on mildly. "This Donahue gent a big eater?"

Ganson looked at him as he might have regarded a louse he was about to crush under his thumbnail. "Who in hell are you?" he inquired coldly.

"Just an interested onlooker," Frosty said. "Reason I asked is, those cows were butchered about the same time. Mebbeso a week apart. How's one man going to eat two cows in two weeks? The meat wouldn't keep much longer'n that in this weather."

Cherry Michaels' eyes widened. "Why, that's right! How do you explain that, Ganson?"

Ganson went red to the roots of his black hair. "I don't have to explain that or anything else!" he exploded. "Donahue's the one on the block, not me. You keep your paws out of this, mister, and stay healthy."

Frosty took the badge out of his pocket and calmly pinned it on his shirt.

"Thanks for the advice, Ganson," he snapped. "But I'm takin' over right here. Certain things about this set-up interest me. You bein' a paid-up member of the Cattle Association, you won't have any objection, I calculate?"

A stir ran through the crowd. Only Ganson hid his surprise. His massive jaws worked.

Then he began to roll a cigarette. "You range dicks take your time about gettin' around to earn your money," he growled. "Now that we're nigh onto goin' broke, you show up fat and sassy as a wolf pup. I never did take much stock in the protection you offer us." He glanced at Dobe. "Go get the sheriff. I'm ridin' out to Donahue's place and I'm bringin' me back a prisoner."

YOU do that," Frosty agreed. "If I find things as you claim, Donahue will have to be jailed. But I aim to see him reach here safe and sound. I'll ride along, Ganson. How about the rest of you?"

"Count me in," Cherry said with a lift of her chin. "Dave, I'll want you, too. Stubborn as Curt is, he's going to get justice at least."

They left town a few minutes later, Frosty, the girl, Sheriff Goss, Ganson and his lieutenants, and Dave Allen. Goss was a pompous, undersized banty rooster of a lawman who talked too much to have many thoughts that he didn't voice on the instant of their birth. So Frosty resolved also to find out if

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someone else was doing his thinking for him.

The way was over an arroyo-slashed rangeland that tipped gently to the foot of the Bearpaw Hills. The gullies were so frequent and deep that a pack of wolves—human or four-footed—could easily make its way unseen to almost any part of Piute Basin. As the drumming hoofs of their mounts took them closer to the mountains, the land became less fertile. Even a setting sun couldn't mask the poverty of it.

Sand and rock replaced rich loam. There was water enough in two little streams that brawled down rocky beds, but of grass there was little. Frosty wondered what kind of a head Curt had on his shoulders, trying to run cattle on talus land. Nothing but cactus and rattlers prospered on a sun-blasted spread like this. Up above, where the foothills ran down to form timbered backdrops, there was grass enough for all the cattle in the basin. Trouble was, the going was too rough for them to reach it.

Emerging from a wide barranca, they burst full into Donahue's D-Dot ranch yard. It was pitifully small but the signs of care were everywhere. Corral fences were new and strong, outbuildings were in good repair, piles of adobe bricks were stacked neatly over by the blacksmith shop for future building. A tendril of blue coal smoke lifted straight from the smithy. Sight of it immediately pulled the cavalcade that way.

Frosty's eyes showed his contempt as Sheriff Goss galloped out in the lead, standing straight up in the stirrups. With overdone authority, the lawman shot a gauntleted hand into the air, called out harshly: "Donahue, come out of there!"

Instantly, a figure appeared at the doorway. He was not tall but broad through the shoulders and narrow in the hips. The dying sun's red rays glistened like copper on his sweating, bare torso. Curt Donahue dropped his sledge hammer and the tire iron he had been repairing. Plainly he was puzzled by the visit.

"Howdy, sheriff," he nodded. "What's the big to-do, some kind of a convention?"

Goss signaled to Apache Weaver and Dobe. They dismounted and came forward with the two hides.

"How did these get in your reservoir?" Goss shot at him.

From the mildewed hides, the young cowman's gaze traveled unhurriedly to Ganson's face, then to Cherry Michaels'.

"You tinhorn ranchers will go to a devil of a lot of trouble to ruin a man, won't you?" he drawled. "Why didn't you just have those low-grade culls you run with ride out here and shoot me, Ganson? Or is it you I have to thank, Cherry?"

The girl's cheeks turned crimson. "Oh, you fool, Curt!" she flared. "You make it so hard for anyone to help you. Heaven knows why I want to!"

"Save your sympathy," Ganson bit out. "Donahue, you've slow-elked your last beef. We're takin' you back to town. You'll stand trial for a lot of things that have smelled hereabouts—if you're lucky."

Frosty noted with a twinge of apprehension the way Curt's big right hand edged toward a worn Peacemaker holstered at his thigh. Quickly Frosty swung down.

"First we're havin' a look at that reservoir," he declared. "Saddle your hoss, mister, and lead the way." More softly, in a way that put a grateful grin on Curt's lips, he concluded: "And remember that a man's innocent until proved guilty."

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CHAPTER III

THE GUN WOLVES RIDE

THE reservoir proved to be a small artificial lake formed where two hummocks ran together to make a fat wedge. Donahue had dammed up the pass at the point where Bitter Creek ran down into Piute Basin. A quarter of a mile east the cedar-cloaked slants of the hills rose sharply away from the prairie. Southward, framed in cottonwoods and green mesquite, lay the Bradded M Ranch, Cherry's holdings. Ganson had his own small spread, built on the profits of his feed and livery business, farther up the valley.

Dobe dismounted and the group followed him to where the bank was low enough for a man to walk right to the water's edge.

"Down there," he grunted, pointing into the muddy depths. "See where we drug 'em out? Gawd knows how many more hides he's dumped in that reservoir."

Frosty squatted on his heels, looking at the drag marks on the ground. Then he tossed a few pebbles in the water.

"You got better eyes than what I have, mister," he stated, "if you knew where to drag for those hides. I can't see a foot below the surface."

Apache's lips curled back from his wolflike teeth.

"Did we say we knew?" he asked sarcastically. "We dragged for two hours before we located them."

Frosty smiled frigidly. "About where did you start?"

"Why—" Apache glanced at Dobe, a frown in his eyes. "Why, right over there near that paloverde," he finished brightly.

The Association man regarded the spot indicated with slow studiousness. After a moment he got up and they all followed him up the shore. The paloverde was about three hundred yards above the place where they had first stopped. Frosty's hand went up for them to stop.

"That's funny," he frowned. "This is the spot you said, but I don't see no footprints like a man might have been rangin' around here. Nobody's been across here for six months. It's almost like you were mistaken—or lyin', Apache!"

Brill Ganson made a sound between a gasp and a snarl.

"Are you gonna let him get away with this, Goss?" he exploded. "It's plain as day he's tryin' to throw mud on my reputation. Dobe and Apache dragged for them hides just like I told 'em to, ridin' in the water just offshore. That's why there's no marks."

Goss cleared his throat and got red around the ears. "Ganson's right," he agreed. "If you can't produce anything more worthy of our attention than this, it's my duty to take Donahue into custody, Flagg. Get down to business."

"This is my business," Frosty clipped, "finding loopholes in the stories, I hear. I'll have to accept that explanation, queer as it sounds. But there's another point. Why would a man throw a hide in his own reservoir when he could have dumped it in the creek down the way and let the current carry it onto somebody else's land?"

Frosty caught the quick, wide-eyed look Cherry gave Curt. Saw, too, the stubborn way he refused to meet her glance.

"That's plain," Ganson said levelly. "Supposin' he was seen doing it? Up here there's no chance of being caught."

Frosty considered, his eyes smoky. "There's another thing still. Haven't you lost cattle in these raids too, Donahue?"

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He saw in a flash that he had said the wrong thing. Everyone looked at Curt. For the first time, suspicion came into the eyes of Poke Martin and Dave Allen.

"That's right!" the stubby Bradded M ramrod jerked. "He ain't lost a head. His two hundred cows are still around somewheres. Been mighty lucky, ain't you, Curt?"

Donahue scowled. "I—mebbe I have. Or mebbe my scrawny primos don't appeal to 'em. Anyway, my herd hasn't growed, has it?"

"Not so's a man could notice," Goss sniffed. "But how many trips have you made across the border lately?" With quick decision he stepped close to the young rancher and flipped his gun from his holster. "I've heard enough. You're under arrest, Donahue. Whether or not you're guilty, the court will decide next week."

Curt's eyes went hard as granite and he rocked forward on the balls of his feet. In the last rays of the sun his face shone sullenly red.

"Damn you, Ganson!" he swore. "You're back of this as sure as you've got skunk blood. And I'm not taking it lying down!"

He was lunging forward with fist drawn back when Frosty Flagg stepped into his path and locked with him. For a moment they were struggling furiously, as the maddened cowman fought to get past.

But during those few seconds Frosty found time to whisper in his ear: "Easy, you young fool! You're playin' into their hands. Leave it to me and I'll get you out of it somehow. Get your hackles down."

The fight went slowly out of Curt Donahue. At last he stood back, panting. His eyes flicked over the group like those of a caged beast. Cherry had turned away stiffly, with Dave and Poke, and the three of them were returning to their horses.

Ganson laughed shortly. "Take care of him, sheriff," he sneered. "He'll bear watchin'. Me and the boys will be at the stable if you want us."

Frosty narrowly watched the liveryman walk away. As the gloom swallowed his swaggering shape, suspicion flared redly in Frosty's mind. He laid a hand on Goss' wrist as the lawman advanced with handcuffs.

"Listen, sheriff," he said. "I'll promise to have this jasper in your *juzgado* by midnight, if you'll just turn him over to me. Say the word and I'll do right by you. There's a reward out for the solution of this cattle-raidin' trouble. I'll see it all goes to you if you play ball."

Goss' greedy little eyes glistened. He pursed his lips. "All right, Flagg," he decided. "But if you let this man loose, it'll mean jail for you and the loss of your job."

"*Gracias*, sheriff!" Frosty smiled. "It's a deal."

GOSS left them standing on the bank of the reservoir. Floating lonesomely through the darkness came the soft beat of his horse's iron shoes in a sandy wash. After that there was silence. Above them night spread across the star-pricked sky like ink staining spangled cloth. Far, far up in the Bearpaws, a wolf howled.

"The wolf pack runs tonight," Curt breathed.

"Why do you say that?" Frosty asked quickly.

Donahue's clear brown eyes were on the foothills, as though trying to penetrate the dark growths of cedar and catclaw.

"Every time I've heard them howl at sunset, there's been a raid," he answered. He, like Frosty, still held his voice to a husky whisper, in the

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manner of a man crossing a dark graveyard. "Last week I saw them come down out of the hills. Dozens of them! And—I saw something else."

Frosty studied his earnest features, but kept his silence.

"Men—three of them—riding far behind the pack. I don't know how they managed it, but they were the leaders of the Devil Wolves. I couldn't hear a sound but every now and then the wolves would veer off as though they'd been ordered to. They slunk down into Ganson's land. That's why I didn't bother chasing them out. But the men never got more than a quarter of a mile from the hills. Yet the damned hell hounds followed their orders even at that distance!"

Memory rang a bell in Frosty Flagg's mind. Two little wrinkles pinched the skin between his eyes. But before he could isolate the thought that was playing tag with his reason, Curt went on.

"I shot one of the varmints once. He wasn't any wolf, he was a shepherd, wild as any lobo, though, and wearing the mark of a collar around his neck. That's how I know those animals are taking orders just like Apache and Dobe take orders from Ganson."

The cry of the wolf beat down wind to them again and it was closer this time. Curt shook himself. As though to change the subject, he said abruptly: "Why'd you ask Goss for permission to take me in?"

"Because you'd never have reached Rusada alive if he took you." Frosty's eyes were sleety gray as he clipped the words. "Somewhere along the road you were going to make a play for it and get yourself shot. I could see it written all over Goss and Ganson. The old game to get a man out of the way. But I had another reason. I wanted to ask you some questions I couldn't ask with them around."

Donahue stood quietly under his piercing gaze.

"What does Ganson want with your land?" Flagg demanded.

"I couldn't say. My water rights aren't worth all this trouble."

Frosty jammed his long hands beneath his cartridge belts. His face had gone hard. "There're enough liars around here without you joining 'em," he snapped. "You can string along with me, give me straight answers to straight questions, or you can play the sad-eyed lonesome and I'll ride back to Albuquerque and tell 'em the mystery is cleared up. Which is it gonna be?"

Donahue was suddenly grinning. "All right," he chuckled. "Here it is. The Great Southwestern Water Co. is going to build an aqueduct right smack across my land. They've got to come through Jackrabbit Cut and I happen to own this end of it. I had a letter offering me forty thousand for this spread when they reach Piute Basin but it may be another sixteen months. That's why I'm trying to hang on here."

"Does Cherry know that?"

"I saw no reason to tell her. She'd just let it get out and I'd have that much more trouble."

"That's not the reason," Frosty said soberly, and his gaze was pitying. "You're just stubborn and prideful enough to want to pop up in her front yard one fine morning with your pockets full of money and a ring in your hand. Then she'll see how right you were and grab at that ring and forgive you for all the heartbreaks you caused her. Only she wouldn't, Curt. She's square and brave enough to want to help you fight this battle. Why don't

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you let her, after this mess is cleared up?"

Donahue turned away sullenly. "I didn't ask you for advice," he growled.

"O. K.," chuckled the range dick. "You got it, though. Now let's go."

THEY hadn't proceeded five miles along the twisting trail back to town when Frosty's sharp ears picked up alien sounds on the warm evening breeze. He glanced at Donahue. The rancher was frowning and looking back, too.

Both of them stiffened as a broken yapping came to their ears from their back trail. Some of the wolves seemed to be coming up fast on their right. Frosty squinted.

"*Vámonos!*" he grunted. "Let's get out of here. Those hungry hounds sound like they were slobbering for horse meat and this nag cost me two hundred pesos."

They bent over the nubbins and let their ponies run. In the sand of the dry wash the animals' hoofs beat out a muted thunder. Minutes flowed by and every second saw the wolf pack closing up the gap.

Suddenly a pair of green lights materialized from the blackness at Frosty's left. Running along the bank of the wash was a huge dog with slavering fangs bared!

In one smooth motion, Frosty ripped out his Frontier Colt and fed the beast hot lead. A scream lifted, then in a cloud of dust the animal came tumbling down the bank. The shot seemed to be the signal for a dozen other dogs to spring from nowhere, running along the wash less than fifty feet behind!

Curt's saddle gun blasted the night apart. Another beast found death in the wash. But it was growing hotter for the riders. Like gray ghosts coming from the hinterland, those giant wolf-dogs poured down the banks of the barranca and closed in from behind. Frosty's horse had its head back, whites of its eyes bared.

Curt suddenly yelled: "It's no use this way! There's a blind wash up ahead. We'll try and stand 'em off there!"

Frosty let him pull ahead. Very soon they swerved into a narrower arroyo. The range dick twisted in the kak to trigger both revolvers into the closely packed mass of hounds. But for every one he dropped, another came up in its place.

Now a wall of dirt and rocks barred the way. Curt pulled his horse in, flung down beside it. He went to one knee, Winchester slamming against his shoulder. Frosty left the saddle in a dive and hit beside him. The horses, screaming their fright, stamped behind them, protected by the rocky pocket of which the gunmen barred the entrance.

Frosty got the feeling that the hounds were ready to quit but were afraid to. There seemed to be about a dozen of them hiding in the rocks and bushes and making occasional sorties. Each rush saw one or two more cut down. But they kept snarling their hatred and vainly trying to get at the riflemen.

Suddenly Frosty laid a hand on the other's arm. Using his rifle as a pointer, he indicated an indistinct shape perhaps two hundred yards away—a horseman sitting his mount on a knoll!

"Stand 'em off, Curt!" he hissed. "I've got me an idea."

Carefully he fitted rifle against shoulder, drew a fine bead. The Winchester crashed. Over there on the rise, dust lifted at the rider's mount's tail. The animal leaped,

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No horse could outrun those vicious brutes. Frosty and Curt spun about to make a last-ditch fight of it.

nearly unseating the man. Swiftly Frosty slammed another slug out. This time the bullet ricocheted from beneath the horse.

The rider pulled in his ears and wheeled the mount. The last Frosty saw of him, he was lacing out for the foothills. With grim satisfaction, he heard Curt gasp: "Look at that, Flagg! Every damn lobo's took to his heels. What'd you do to 'em?"

"Just scared off their master," said Frosty. "A little man with a big, important whistle. You and I couldn't hear that whistle but those dogs can!"

CHAPTER IV

DEVIL'S HOIST

DONAHUE came slowly to his feet. "I don't get it," he muttered.

"That yahoo was blowing one of those high-frequency whistles," Frosty explained. "A man's ears aren't sensitive to them but they hurt a dog's eardrums something awful. When that whistle blows, these dogs have been trained to know what's expected of 'em. But there's no time to stand here jawin'. We're going to follow them."

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Curt said: "You're the doctor. Are we carryin' the fight to 'em?"

"Mebbe. We'll see how things work out," Frosty told him. With only that for explanation, he led the way up the bank.

Following cautiously, they trailed the dogs and riders to the foothills. The trail tipped sharply up. Pine needles and cedar scale padded the ground. Curt looked around and said, "We trailed the rustled cattle this far. There's a cliff ahead where we lost them."

Frosty nodded. His sharp eyes quested through the dark shadows barring the way. And suddenly he was reining down, stabbing an arm aloft for attention. Voices came to them. The creak of leather. And something that might have been the wooden rattle of heavy block and tackle. Silently the pair lit down and crept ahead on foot.

Through tangled buckthorn, Frosty could see the terraced steps of a scab-rock cliff that soared from the talus ahead. He moved forward until his gaze made out the forms of two men at work at the foot of the cliff. Just what they were doing it was impossible to tell.

Then they stepped back and one lifted his head and cupped hands about his mouth. "Haul away!" he called cautiously.

"Got you." The answer dropped from the top of the granite scarp.

Leather groaned and heavy blocks grated. Something that looked like a boulder came off the ground, rising slowly up the face of the cliff. The workmen watched carefully.

"That gets it," one said with satisfaction, eyes on the mounting, swaying burden.

The thoughts of the other were not on the rig, however. His voice came as a sullen growl. "Damn Apache for losin' those two! That complicates things."

"Hell! The boss already had his plans laid in case they got away," scoffed the other, a Mexican by the purring accent of his words. "Whether Donahue reports to Goss or not, his stick's floatin' low. Tomorrow night's job will finish him."

A growl rumbled in the young rancher's throat and caused Frosty to clamp firm fingers about his wrist. Both men went rigid, as the Mexican glanced behind him, straight at their hiding place.

After a second he shrugged. "Looks like she's gonna hold all right," he grunted to his companion. Raising his voice to the men atop the cliff he shouted, "Let 'er go! She'll do."

"That's four of them," announced the other. "We can lift forty beefs an hour."

Nothing more was said. The great rock silently slid back to its place, leather slings were stricken off it, and the apparatus was tucked away in a crevice. Frosty hissed an order. He and Curt retreated, found their ponies, and stole away.

Curt was the one to have his say first. "What I don't savvy is this: How are they goin' to blame a raid on me if I'm behind bars? That'll give Ganson's story the lie."

Frosty Flagg didn't make answer for a time. A worried puzzlement showed in his somber features.

"You've got me, too. I thought I could lay this whole thing down on paper and show the next move everybody was going to make. Now—" Swiftly a reckless grin claimed his features. "We'll ride this trail when we come to it. You've got a date with a jail cell and I'm tired playing hooky from my henskin. Tomorrow we'll see what we see."

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BY afternoon of the following day, Frosty was ready to admit he was stumped. He'd been down to the jail a couple of times to console and encourage Curt but he didn't feel that encouragement.

Questions kept crawling like lizards through his brain. Had he added three and three and got seven, in this game of Devil's arithmetic? He checked and rechecked his figuring and came up with nothing more than a headache.

Ganson was the culprit, he would swear. The liveryman's game apparently was to throw so much suspicion on Curt Donahue that they would send him to prison or lynch him. Then, on some pretext, he aimed to appropriate Curt's land. Patently, he had learned of the aqueduct.

But last night's findings had shot the works to hell. With Curt in jail, a raid on the Basin ranchers' cattle would prove him innocent. The whole thing made Frosty Flagg feel like a man who has drained what he thought was a glass of whiskey and found it to be iced tea.

The answer exploded upon him as he sat in the Chinaman's Restaurant trying to eat an early dinner. Curt Donahue himself walked in the door!

Frosty's fork banged on the counter. "Whatever from hell!" the range detective gasped.

"Goss let me out on a bond," Donahue told him as he sat down. "Now I'm free to be in on the fireworks."

Chips of ice glinted in Frosty's eyes. "Sure you're free," he agreed. "Free to play the sucker once more. What was the bond you put up?"

"Fifteen hundred dollars. I gave my ranch as security."

"Now it begins to make sense. You'll be on the loose when tonight's raid happens. They'll jug you again and take over your ranch for breaking the terms of your release. Ganson's got you over the barrel, Curt."

The grin washed from Curt's lips. "I didn't think of it that way," he admitted. "What do I do, go back and ask to be locked up again?"

"That would halt Ganson temporarily," said Frosty. "But the next time he decided to act, we wouldn't be forewarned like we are now. And next time may be spelled in hemp. No, we'll go ahead like it is. Get yourself a bait of grub. We're riding out to see Cherry, Poke, and the others."

With late afternoon shadows dragging across the prairie, they rode into Cherry Michaels' spacious ranch yard. The coolness of dusk hung mistily in the shaded aisles of the cottonwoods as they gigged their horses up toward the corral. Frosty left his horse at the water trough and walked alone to the door. Stubborn as ever, Curt hung back.

Cherry herself answered the door. Frosty caught his breath at her loveliness as she stood with the lamplight striking golden glints through her hair.

"Evening, Miss Michaels," he said, lifting his Stetson from his head. "Me and young Curt, yonder, we'd like a little powwow if you ain't too busy."

"Curt! Is that him over there?" the girl cried. "I thought he was in jail."

Within the room a chair scraped and Dave Allen, pencil over one cauliflower ear and dog-eared tally book in his hand, appeared behind her. By the worried lines edging his eyes, it was plain that what he read in the ledger was disheartening.

"What brings you out here?" he growled.

A timber wolf selected that moment to howl dismally.

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"That's what brings us," Frosty declared. "That howlin' wolf means you and Poke Martin and a few others will lose some more cattle tonight. You want to try and save them, and incidentally do Curt some good?"

Cherry sniffed. "I don't care about Curt but I would like to save my cattle. How do you know they're going to raid?"

"Same way I know Ganson let Curt out for his own purposes. Your men are riding night herd, I reckon?"

"Eight of them. They've orders to shoot anything that even smells like a dog."

"Well, they can't hurt anything and it'll keep 'em out of mischief. There's no way we can stop the Devil Wolves but we can drop a *mangana* about the he-coon that leads 'em. You want to be in on it, Allen?"

The stubby little ramrod snapped his fingers. "R'arin' to!" he jerked out.

Frosty stepped down out of the doorway. "Saddle your hoss," he ordered. "Miss Michaels, I'm hopin' we'll have them beefs of yours back on home range by morning."

The girl disappeared for a second to the side of the door. When she reappeared, she was tucking her curls up under her hat.

"I'm sure we will, Mr. Flagg," she smiled. "Got room for one more?"

"No!" Frosty clipped. "This isn't going to be a party. A woman don't belong. There'll be powder smoke aplenty."

"Fine!" Cherry started for her little cow pony in the corral. "I was brought up on trouble. We'll pick up Poke Martin on the way. Let's get started."

Frosty Flagg, who had had his teaching about women here and there, wisely kept his mouth shut and went back to his horse. He muffled Curt's objections with hard, explosive syllables. He even got the feeling that the rancher was glad of a chance to ride beside this girl.

CHAPTER V

DEATH IN THE BRAKES

LONG before they reached the Bearpaws, Frosty's keen gaze picked out swift, gliding bodies ranging through the barrancas. Here and there they heard the sound of moving cattle. Yet all was done so quietly that one who did not know might think nothing was happening.

In a little gully they drew rein and watched small bunches of ten or twelve steers merge by magic into one moving mass. Hidden by dust and brush, the slinking animals at their heels were invisible. Up through the rocky talus they moved, disappearing at last in the cedar brakes. It was then that Frosty gave the word to dismount and follow.

As on the preceding night, they gained shelter in the underbrush without being seen. Of dogs there was no sign. But in the clearing were around a hundred and fifty prime cows. Two men worked frantically at the cliff's base trying to lash a stubborn longhorn into one of the leather slings.

Already two bawling animals were being hoisted up the cliff, one of them forty or fifty feet ahead of the other. Frosty saw the top one reach the cliff's edge and swing in. Shortly the sling dropped over the bank and came whistling down again.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the starlight, they were able to see that a flimsy rope corral kept the beasts from bolting. Another primo went soaring up the scarp and the

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tall, lean puncher with the Mexican twang darted to the corral and roped out another cow.

Dave Allen put his lips against Frosty's ear. "How do you figger to manage this army?" he hissed. "There must be twenty of 'em up above, hauling up the cattle."

Frosty shook his head. "I'm banking that they've got their block and tackle geared down to where one man could manage each cow. Look how slow they go up. Ganson is smart enough to be careful how many he lets in on the know."

For a moment he was silent, studying the set-up. Then, nudging Dave, Poke and Curt, he outlined his plan. Grim-eyed, they nodded. The range detective got Cherry's promise not to stir until they gave her the word.

As the pair of punchers returned from the corral with steers, Frosty began a creeping advance toward them. At his heels came the other three. Bowstring-taut, the group bided their time in a clump of chokecherry not twenty feet from the rustlers.

The Mex raised his voice: "Haul away!"

The steer's hoofs came off the ground—and in the same instant Frosty was leaping across the bare terrain. Blue gun steel glinted in his upraised hand. Viciously he brought the weapon down on the puncher's head. The Mex collapsed.

Poke and Curt piled on the other man. He got out one muffled oath before they clubbed him senseless. Then they mechanically went into their routine. Curt and Frosty jumped for one of the slings and clambered into it. Poke and Dave manned the other.

Frosty waited a reasonable length of time, then called out: "Haul away!"

Dave Allen gave the signal for the other hoist. Side by side then, banging against the rock wall, they soared skyward.

It was an experience that filed at the nerves of every man. At any moment one of the rustlers might look down and discover their ruse. If that happened—Frosty Flagg's throat muscles tightened at the thought.

But the moments fled by. They were a hundred feet above the corral and fast nearing the top. Other slings passed them going down. Then suddenly they were rising above the rim—and staring into the face of a startled workman!

FOR one timeless second Death was beckoning to them with a crooked finger.

The man—it was Apache—began yelling and running backward, tugging at his guns. "Cut the ropes!" he bawled. *"It's that range dick!"*

Poke Martin's six-gun belched once and Apache crashed backward with a hole through his chest. His guns went off in their holsters. Frosty was leaping for the bank. His eyes were filled with the turmoil before him. Ganson, Sheriff Goss, Dobe, and another man each held a rope that ran through the block and tackles. They had deserted those ropes now for guns.

Frosty fell into a crouch. The others were spilling to the turf all about him.

"Elevate, Ganson!" he snapped harshly. "I won't tell you twice."

Brill Ganson's fury was that of a wounded grizzly. He went down on one knee, leveled his Colt across his left forearm and began to fire. One of his slugs passed so close to the Association man that the sound of it was like that of ripping silk magnified a hundred times.

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Frosty coldly punched a shot back at him. It took Ganson in the shoulder and slammed him around as though he'd been struck by a giant fist. Blood splashed the front of his gray shirt.

Sheriff Goss was screeching at Frosty in his reedy voice. His hands were high. "You've got us, Flagg!" the sheriff bawled. "Don't shoot!"

Dobe whirled on him like a cougar, slammed a gun barrel across his face. Then, as the lawman went down, he blazed at the cowmen with stuttering .45s. Curt Donahue groaned. His legs buckled under him, but on his knees, he kept on fighting.

Ganson was up again. His colossal pride seemed to hold him erect, refusing to acknowledge that he had been hurt. But that pride could not sustain him when Curt's slug reached his heart. A wreck of the man he had been moments before, he toppled forward on the ground.

Like a vicious little wolf, Dobe continued to fight until the concentrated fire of the ranchers chopped him down. A great silence flowed in when the guns ceased to crash. Only the groaning of Sheriff Goss was heard. Then the sheriff regained consciousness and began to babble wildly. In a few minutes he had told the whole secret of Ganson and the Devil Wolves.

Frosty smiled grimly as he thought how smartly Ganson had hoodwinked the countryside. The renegade had a way with dogs and knew their peculiarities. It was all simple to the range detective now as he mentally pieced together the facts. Ganson had discovered that dogs are capable of hearing sounds that escape the human senses and had evolved a small wooden whistle of such high note that only they heard it when he called them. And he had trained his wild pack to answer his whistled commands. Thus he was able to keep his mastership over them secret, making the beasts do his bidding by the process of high-frequency sounds sent out even while he mingled with a crowd. But all that was past now, Frosty realized. It would be a simple matter to call together the remainder of the pack, even as Ganson had directed their movements, and put them to better use.

Suddenly from far below came a frantic cry: "Curt! Curt, are you all right?"

Curt Donahue blinked like a man just waking up. Frosty winked.

"Somebody's paging you," he pointed out. "Not gonna keep hunkering there, are you?"

Donahue painfully got to his feet, his game leg wobbly under him. He started toward the hoist, hesitated.

"You—you reckon she's still mad at me?" he faltered.

Poke Martin swelled his capacious chest. "Some fellers learn quick, and others have to be pitched over a cliff before they catch on," he gritted. Suddenly roaring, he commanded: "Git in that sling and let us lower you down, you spavined gun-hellion! Your future's a-waitin'!"

Curt began to hobble toward the hoist, a grin smeared over his boyish features. Frosty Flagg, hard-bitten man hunter that he was, felt moisture trying to spring into his eyes. It wasn't hard to realize the things that were in the young rancher's overflowing heart.

Abruptly, he stalked to the hoist, all business once more.

"Easy on that rope now, men!" he warned. "He's got this close to a happy ending, don't make it a sad one by droppin' the dang fool!"

THE END.

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SMOKE

BY HARRY R. KELLER

Down in a gulch where the wagon train
  Awaited the Western morn,
A red campfire had begun to wane
  In the hour when I was born.
Across my face, in that dim place,
  The gray smoke must have blown.
For this I know: In the long ago,
  Smoke claimed me for her own.

By sundown fires on the mesa's rim;
  By hills where the white flames broke
In lethal lines through the crackling pines,
  I've seared my lungs with smoke.
I've matched my wits with a prairie fire
  While the wild blaze lapped the skies,
And I cursed aloud at the stinging cloud
  Of smoke in my blinded eyes.

Roundup time—and the hot iron glows
  As the dogies' bawls lift higher;
And the stench of the burnt hair nips my nose
  In the smoke of the branding fire.
And then, when the cook fire's smoke is dead,
  And the dust-red sun has set,
I lounge and laze in a dreamy haze—
  The smoke of a cigarette!

Smoke of the salal, smoke of the sage
  And smoke of the fragrant weed
Trace their lines on the pungent page
  Of the West, that all may read.
But over all lies the deathless scrawl
  Of the gun-smoke heritage
That brought the law to a land laid raw
  By the wolves of a wanton age!

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Death was waiting in that alley behind the Palace Bar, but Cal walked straight into it!

When those gunhawks tried to take over Sacaton, Cal Winters faced them alone and through the swirling gunsmoke everyone saw the

BRAND OF A FIGHTING MARSHAL

BY LEE FLOREN

WHEN Marshal Cal Winters came out of the Porter House he saw Mary Thurman sweeping the board sidewalk in front of her millinery shop down the street. She was a pretty girl with a small face and reddish-brown hair, and she smiled at him with the confidential smile that a girl shows only to the man she loves.

But Cal Winters had no time for her now. He stepped into the street and headed for the Palace Bar directly opposite the hotel. When he was in the middle of the rutted street the batwing doors of the saloon opened and Jack Nelson came out. Nelson stood on the sidewalk, his thumbs hooked in the broad belt

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that held his two .45s, a truculent smile on his thin lips.

"You lookin' for me, marshal?" he asked.

Cal Winters said, "You picked the wrong town, Nelson. I usually allow a man to stay in Sacaton, regardless of his past, as long as he remains peaceful and keeps a civil tongue. But you talk too much. I warned you yesterday. This country don't need men like you."

His tone was low and firm, yet it carried well.

Nelson nodded. "So you want me to saddle up an' pull out?" he asked.

"I sure do," Winters said.

"I never run in my life," Nelson said. "I'm not so damn old but I figure I'm too old to start learnin' new tricks. What if I don't run, Winters?"

Winters said, "I'm givin' you your choice, Nelson."

He lifted his gaze slightly, letting it run beyond Nelson; yet always, automatically, he kept the gunman within his vision. With the calm, steady coolness of a veteran, he checked the location of the townspeople on the sidewalks, noticing that Mary Thurman still stood before her store, watching them through wide eyes.

The men in front of the Palace had moved and now they stood before the Mercantile, leaving an open space behind Nelson. Somewhere, up the street, a man called to another. Then Cal Winters deliberately pushed the town from his thoughts, concentrating on the killer, hearing no sound other than Nelson's low voice.

"I'm not ridin' out," Nelson said. His voice rose a little, though he tried to keep it level. Then his right hand went for his gun, bringing the weapon smoothly from leather. But before he could fire Cal Winters' bullet drove him backward.

Jack Nelson's knees buckled and he knelt on the sidewalk. Then he put his left hand over the spot on his flannel shirt, tried to raise his gun and fire, but the strength seemed to run out of him and he fell forward on his face.

Winters heard Mary Thurman scream. He took his gaze from Nelson but the girl was gone; only her broom remained there on the sidewalk. And the door of her millinery shop, open the moment before, was now closed.

Winters reloaded his gun, holstered the piece, crossed the street and picked up the broom and leaned it against the store. Then, unhurried, he went down the street to enter the Palace.

Rabon and Sanger were seated at a card table at the far corner of the big room. Winters went that way. He noticed that the two men, from where they sat, could look through the long high glass windows fronting the saloon and could see the body of Jack Nelson on the sidewalk.

Winters smiled tightly. "Jack Nelson's dead," he told them.

"We know that," Rabon said, his long fingers toying with a pile of red and white poker chips. "Somethin' else, Winters?"

"There sure is," Winters said. "Was Nelson workin' for you two men?"

"He was," Sanger replied, looking at Rabon. "Anythin' else?"

Winters picked his words with care. "You two been in Sacaton almost a month," he murmured. "You've been only trouble an' bother. I've had a number of complaints regardin' the Palace."

Sanger said evenly, "We've gone over that before."

"A week ago," Winters said, "you hired Jack Nelson. You knew he

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was a gunman—that he boasted of bein' a killer. But his mouth was too big. And his talk too profane. Some town women and men, too—well, they didn't like Nelson's ways. This town don't like none of you."

"Which all leads to what?" Rabon asked.

"Last night the town council met. I put the question up for vote. They thought as I did. So I'm givin' you till sundown to pull out, gentlemen. The banker up the street'll buy your property just to get you out of town."

"At his own price!" Rabon snorted. He did not toy with the chips now; he held them tightly, the skin on his sharp knuckles white. He looked at Sanger and then at the clock behind the bar.

His words were a little clipped. "It's ten now," he said. "The sun sets about seven. That gives us nine hours."

Winters nodded.

"Nine hours is a long time," Sanger said slowly. He leaned back in his chair, his thumbs hooked in his vest, his heavy eyes lidded slightly. "Too long a time, huh, Rabon?"

"I think so," Rabon agreed.

Sanger said, "How about noon? Twelve o'clock?"

Winters studied them for a second. "That'll give you two hours to think it over in," he said. "You might think different by then. But at twelve sharp I'm comin' down the alley behind the Palace. If you're still here, it means fight. This town can't stand the likes of you two any longer."

HE left by the front door. Already Jack Nelson had been carried into the frame building used as a morgue. The broom still stood beside the millinery store. Winters took it inside, to find Mary Thurman behind the counter. She was alone in the store.

"You forgot this outside," he said.

"Yes," she nodded, "I did."

He knew she tried to make her voice casual, yet the tremor in it betrayed her emotions; and, as always, he thought of the barrier between them and he wondered suddenly if time would sweep that barrier away.

"I gave him his choice, Mary," he said simply. "But he wouldn't go. He took the hard way out to save his reputation."

He put his hand on the doorknob, although he knew he could not leave so soon. The sight of her, as ever, disturbed his calmness, made his blood move a little faster.

"Rabon and Sanger?" she asked. "What about them, Cal?"

He said, "They have to go, too."

"Did you tell them that?"

"I did. I gave them till sundown."

"Will they go?"

"I think they will," he said, deliberately lying.

"They won't go," she said. "I know they won't!" She came from behind the counter and stood before him. "Cal," she said, "do you remember what we talked about last night? After the council meeting?"

"Can I ever forget it?" he replied.

She bit her lower lip and said, hopelessly, "I guess it is no use." Then the pent-up words within her broke loose. "This town's keeping us apart, Cal. This town—and this cattle land. This mean, deceitful land with its terrible winters when cattle die for want of hay or freeze to death on their hoofs. And in the summers they die of thirst and starve to death. Sometimes I think you men here are like the land—harsh and cruel and jealous of whoever comes on it!"

He took her hands in his.

Continued on page 88

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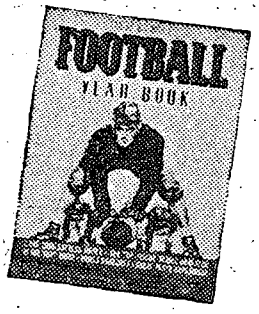

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Continued from page 86

"Honey," he said, his voice a husky whisper, "don't say that. You have only been here one winter and this summer. This land is good, but it's young, like a colt. Young and strong, it wants to show its untamed strength. A colt has to be broken to bit and saddled and made to work in a constructive way. We have to do the same to this land, tame it like we would a colt so that our children, when they receive it, will have a clean, healthy land. It's hard to explain, Mary. But that's why men like Jack Nelson, like Rabon, like Sanger, have to go."

"I wish I could see it that way," she said. "I wish I could love it like you love it, Cal."

"You will in time," he told her. "After a while, you'll understand. Or else"—he spread his fingers hopelessly—"I'll have to remain a bachelor. Or marry Maggie James" The lines around his eyes crinkled.

"That homely girl!" Mary gasped.

"But I will marry her," Winters threatened.

She smiled then and rose on tiptoe, drew down his head and kissed him.

"Don't do that," he said. "That only makes it harder." For the barrier, he knew, still remained, holding them apart.

He was thinking of this as he went toward the livery barn. He stopped at the Sugar Bowl Café and, while talking with Maggie, took a handful of sugar lumps from the box under the counter. Outside he met Bill Myers, the banker.

"Rabon an' Sanger been to see you yet?" he asked the fat man.

The banker shook his head. "Ain't seen hide or hair of them."

Cal Winters started on but the banker took him by the arm and halted him. "You'll need help, Winters," he said. "Now me—"

Winters said, "They hired me for town marshal, Bill."

"I know that," Myers nodded. "But there's two of them and they won't move, I'm tellin' you. I just thought—"

"I gave them till sundown. If they ain't gone by then it's my duty to make them go or arrest them."

Myers studied him, then said slowly: "I reckon you're right, Winters."

Winters continued down the street and entered the livery barn. His horse nickered softly. The marshal rubbed its nose and ears and curried the animal. He fed him the sugar, then he saddled and rode toward the mountains to the south.

Here the sagebrush stood knee high to his horse and greasewood lifted scrawny branches. Blue-joint and foxtail grass grew between the spaces. The prairie stretched ahead and merged into the foothills, and beyond the foothills towered the snow-capped peaks of the Little Rockies.

Winters rode at a walk, letting his animal pick its path, trying to forget what waited for him in Sacaton, turning his thoughts to Mary Thurman.

Would she ever understand? Couldn't she see that the basic elements were simple, yet essential, to him? You followed the growth and the moods of the land until you became a part of it. Then you saw the whole of it, saw your place in the building of a new land, saw your duties and did not question them. You just did your best.

An hour later he rode into the livery stable and unsaddled his horse. He watered and grained the animal and filled the manger with blue-joint hay.

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He stood for a moment in the wide doorway, looking over the town. He saw Mary leave her store and enter the Sugar Bowl. He knew without looking at his watch that the time was ten to twelve. He checked his guns, seeing that they were loaded, then tested the heft of their steel. Then he walked down the alley which ran behind the Palace Bar.

WHEN he was two hundred feet from the building's rear door, Rabon and Sanger stepped into the alley and walked toward him. They came about fifty feet forward, spreading out so that they stood about ten feet apart. Then they waited for him.

When Rabon spoke, his voice sounded a little too high, too shrill. "We're not jerkin' stakes," he said.

"I can see that," Winters assured him.

He walked on, his pace even and sure, his eyes missing nothing. And while he went forward, he talked.

"Why not give up?" he asked. "Go to jail. Or get out of town. Get off this land. This way some of us, maybe all of us, will get killed."

"That's our lookout," Sanger said.

Sanger glanced at Rabon, who nodded slightly. Swiftly their guns leaped out and roared. But Cal Winters kept walking ahead, taking his time, while Rabon and Sanger stood there, dark and terrible and wrapped in swirling gunsmoke.

Then, Rabon dropped with surprising suddenness. He sat down hard in the dust, leaned forward and coughed, and died that way. Still Cal Winters walked forward, slowly, steadily. One of Sanger's bullets hit his right thigh, stopping him momentarily, then he went forward again, shooting carefully and spacing his shots with an accurate regularity.

A bullet slapped Sanger in the left shoulder. The man whirled and started to run, and Winters raised his gun, sighting it upon the man.

"Stop!" he called.

But Sanger didn't stop. So Winters braced himself and let the hammer fall, deliberately shooting at Sanger's boots, hoping to scare the man into stopping. But Sanger kept running. Suddenly, three townsmen appeared at the alley's mouth and Sanger went down under their furious onslaught.

Winters lowered his gun, feeling weak. He sat down, there in the alley. Later, in the doctor's office, they found that the bullet had torn the flesh but had broken no bones.

Finally, he and the doctor were alone. Then it was that Mary came to him. She stood beside him as he sat on the high table, saying nothing for a while, wondering just how to begin.

Then she said: "Sanger's in jail. The county attorney says he has enough evidence to hang him. He says Sacaton will be peaceful now that Sanger and Rabon are gone. I heard Mrs. Carter say the same thing. They were the root of the trouble in this land, Cal."

"I think so," he said and waited.

She spoke carefully, slowly. "I think I am beginning to understand what you mean to these people, Cal; what we all mean to this land." She looked at him and something moved mightily in his blood. "I think you can teach me the rest. I'll try so hard to learn to love this country, too."

"I know you will," he said.

THE END.

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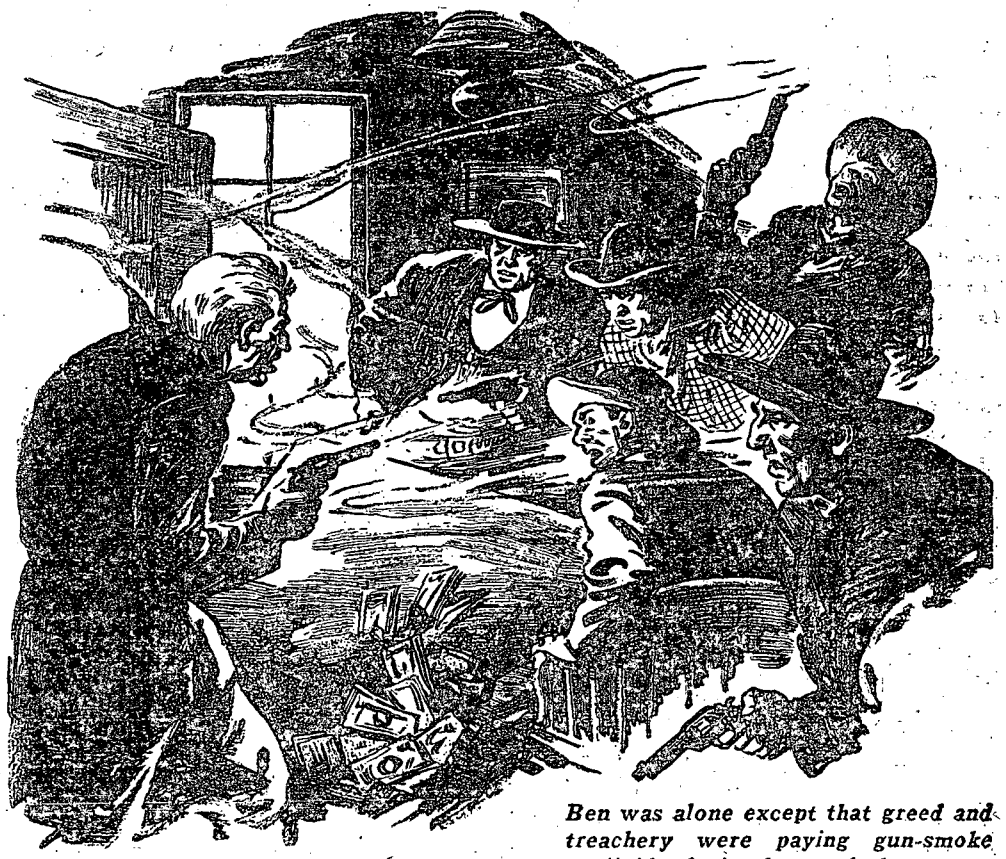

Ben was alone except that greed and treachery were paying gun-smoke dividends in that packed room.

NOTHING TO LOAN BUT GUNFLAME

With his bank in the red, Ben Conifer had one chance to balance his books—by trading hot lead with a land-grabbing vulture.

BY RALPH YERGEN

SEATED behind the desk marked "President," Ben Conifer let his worried gaze drop to the cigarette between his fingers. The burnt end was quivering. The banker put the butt in an ash tray, a faint, ironic smile etching a tolerant crinkle across his thin, enigmatic face.

He shifted in his chair, and passed a slim hand over his graying temples. His hand came away damp. That was a laugh. Sweating in zero weather! Why was he in such a stew? The suspense would be over in a few minutes.

Vaguely, he heard Al Parker, his white-haired cashier, shuffling papers at the teller's cage behind the high, iron grillwork. He looked out the window, down the familiar, frozen

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street. Redfox was nearly deserted. The bitter north wind threshed the bare branches and chased up little swirls of dust. This was the thirty-second day Redfox and the Battleground Prairie lay frozen solid, following the long summer and autumn draught. Cattlemen were nearly at the end of their rope. Everyone was on the ragged edge of despair.

The squeak of shoes brought Ben swiveling about in his chair. A chubby man with black-rimmed spectacles emerged from the back office. He rested his brief case on the bank president's desk and crossed his fat hands on top of it.

Ben cleared his throat, waited silently. This man, the State bank examiner, held the future of the bank and of Battleground Prairie in his hands.

"I've waded through your books, Conifer," said the chunky official. His voice was blunt. "Your bank is on the border line. You've loaned to the hilt. One more loan and I'd have had to close your doors."

Relief flowed through Ben Conifer and he relaxed in his chair. Then he wasn't broke—yet.

"I'm not trying to tell you how to run your business, Conifer," the bank examiner continued severely. "But you better tighten down before it's too late."

Ben's sigh was weary. "If only this damnable weather—"

"I know all about the weather," the bank examiner said brusquely, picking up his brief case. "Well, so long, Conifer. I'll be back some other time when you don't know I'm coming."

When the State bank official was gone, Ben leaned back and pulled out tobacco and papers. He rolled a cigarette and lit it, feeling some of the tension go out of him. He had skinned through the first round; but the battle, he knew, was only beginning.

The door swished inward and a lean, flat-muscled man in range garb clumped determinedly inside. Looking up, Ben recognized Link Ames, and he saw that the cowman's brown jaw was set.

"How are you, Link?" the banker said tonelessly.

"I've got to have a loan, Ben," Ames announced bluntly. "I'm flat broke and I've got to have feed."

A shadow came into Ben Conifer's gray eyes. He shook his head. "Sorry, Link. I can't let you have it. No more loans to cowmen. No more loans to anybody."

Link Ames looked as if he hadn't heard right. His mouth thinned a little. "But you've got to, man! My cattle are so weak they can't stand. Everything is froze tight. They got to have meal cake, hay, straw, anything, or I'll lose the whole works."

Desperation flooded the cowman's dark eyes. His voice became taut, hoarse. "Damn it, man, if I lose all my cattle— Look, Ben, a couple of thousand will stand me off a while, maybe till the weather breaks. You know my ranch is worth ten times that much."

Ben nodded wearily. "Yes, I know that, Link."

"Then why can't you let me have it?"

Ben Conifer looked out the window. He couldn't tell Ames the bank was on the verge of going to the wall, that too much money already loaned was the cause of it. If the news leaked out, it would start a run on deposits that would break it in a day. Then everybody on the Battleground Prairie would suffer.

"You've got my answer already, Link. The same answer I have to give everybody from now on."

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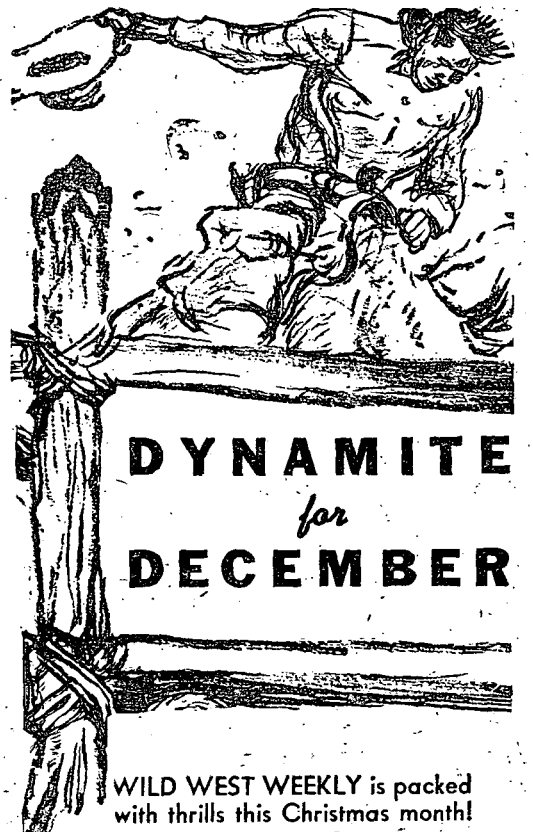

WILD WEST WEEKLY is packed with thrills this Christmas month!

Take a Western trail, a screeching wind—and an hombre with an iron heart . . . that's WEST IS WEST, by John A. Saxon, in the December 7th issue.

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WILD WEST WEEKLY

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The lean cowman's fists clenched. A wave of red rushed to his face. He swallowed hard. Then silently he turned and stalked to the door.

BEN CONIFER got up and tried to shake an invisible weight off his shoulders. Turning down honest men like Link Ames made him feel as though a knife was being stabbed in him.

Next spring, when the tender green bunchgrass dotted the hill, Link Ames would be broke because the bank had not been able to give him a little help.

Ben kept telling himself none of this was his fault. It was the worst spell of weather, draught and freeze, that had ever struck the Battleground country. He'd done all he could, had shoved a small private fortune of his own into the bank, trying to keep it solvent. Now he was penniless himself, except for the Horn C, the old home ranch his father had left.

His thoughts were gloomy when the grizzled old cashier tapped him on the shoulder.

"Five bells, Ben. Through for the day?"

"Sure. Lock 'er up, Al."

As Ben pushed through the door, the wind struck him like a quirt. He hurried across the street and up the sidewalk, past a squat, unpainted office building. A newly painted sign sprawled across the grimy window:

AJAX LAND COMPANY
Blake Ludlow, Manager

A trace of contempt thinned Ben's lips as he read the second line.

Entering the saloon next door, he stepped to the bar and poured himself a glass of Three Star. As he stood drinking it, he noticed Link Ames down at the end of the bar. The rancher was talking with

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a huge, bull-necked man whose brown business suit failed to conceal the strength of his giant frame. The big man passed around a bottle to some of Ames' cowman neighbors who were playing stud at a wall table.

The banker could well imagine what Blake Ludlow was saying as he passed that bottle. Ben knew a few things about Ludlow and his Ajax Land Co. He guessed a few other things.

Ludlow and his three hard-faced hangers-on, Nick Gandil, Joe Struce, and Chub Beck, loafed in their office, like a quartet of buzzards. They had picked up a couple of small ranches for practically nothing. But mostly they were waiting for Ben Conifer's bank to go broke. Backed by powerful financial interests in the State capital, they were ready to step in and sweep up the Battleground Prairie for a fraction of its true value when the blow-off forced liquidation. Ben knew all this, but the knowledge was useless. The ranchers swallowed Ludlow's slick lies and came up for more. Just as they were doing now.

Ludlow's voice swelled to fill the room. He pointed a beefy finger toward Ben Conifer. "There's your moneybag, boys," he said harshly. "That little shrimp has got enough gold salted away to stall a mule team. Ready to lend you some when you don't need it. But when your cows are dyin', he tells you he can't spare a dime!"

COOLLY, Ben turned around and hooked his elbows to the bar, aware of the hostile glare from the half-inebriated ranchmen. His level gray eyes bored into the coffee-colored slits beneath Ludlow's bushy brows.

The big land agent grinned crookedly. "He's so scairt he'll lose a nickel, he don't even keep his dough in his own bank."

Somebody snickered. Ben laid down his glass quietly. A steely anger in his gray eyes, he stepped lightly in front of Blake Ludlow. A hush of tension clamped down on the room.

Ben's voice was clear, sharp. "That's a lie, Ludlow! The same as a lot of others you've spilled."

A faint sneer turned down the corners of Ludlow's thick lips. "Cocky little rooster, ain't he?"

Ben's fist stabbed out and smacked on the big man's jutting chin. The abruptness of the blow caught Ludlow off guard. He rocked backward, throwing up his hamlike fists. Ben pounced after him, tigerish swiftness in his slender frame. His fists drummed against flesh and bone, but Ludlow's chin was like iron. He shook off the punches as if he was shedding raindrops.

Then something like a sledge smashed Ben's cheek. He saw colored sparks before his eyes as another murderous blow thudded above his ear. He lashed out with both hands, felt them sink into flesh. Then a third deadly punch sent him sailing backward to the floor.

He came up slowly, his light frame thoroughly shaken. He was no match for Ludlow, who outweighed him by over fifty pounds. But he gritted his teeth to fight off the dizziness, and waded in, both fists streaking.

Blake Ludlow was waiting for him this time. Ben seemed to run into a brick wall. The shock jarred every nerve in his slight body. His legs seemed to turn to water, and he went down. He

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struggled a minute, trying to rise, but it was no use. His muscles would not respond.

Somebody kicked him in the ribs and tobacco juice splattered the back of his neck. He guessed it was the ranchers, half full of Ludlow's liquor, venting their fanned wrath upon the man they blamed for their plight.

Groggily, he recognized Nick Gandil's oily face bending over him. Then he was lifted bodily and thrown outside into the frozen street.

He lay there awhile, letting the chill of the wind revive his numbed muscles. When his senses fully returned, he climbed unsteadily to his feet and stood there braced against the wind. He was relieved to see that the street was deserted.

The indignity of it began to build up in his mind. He, Ben Conifer, president of the Redfox State Bank, heaved out in the gutter like a drunken saloon bum. Savage rage reared up and clutched at his reasoning. With an effort, he thrust it back and trudged homeward.

He knew he couldn't blame the cattlemen for their ugly mood. Seeing their cattle starve, their families suffer, their hopes and dreams wither and vanish with the wind was straining their reason beyond endurance. As for Blake Ludlow, that was another matter. Thinking of the gloating land agent, Ben's bruised jaw muscles tightened until they ridged out like knotted cords.

AFTER a night of troubled dreams, Ben Conifer saddled and rode into the frigid dawn. The wind came up with the sun, and Ben toed his silver mare to a brisk pace. A disagreeable task confronted him, and he wanted to get it over with. He had decided to sell the Horn C!

Tight-fisted Joel Floud, who owned the ranch bordering the Horn C, had offered twenty thousand dollars for the spread a week before. Ben had spurned the offer, about a third the true value of the spread. Anyway, the Horn C was worth more to him than what it could bring in money. The ranch had been carved out of the wilderness by his father. After the latter's death, Ben had bought out his younger brother. There was a wild streak in Andy Conifer that had led him into the uncertain profession of gambling. Ben knew that his brother would have lost his share of the ranch sooner or later.

Ben had never thought anything could drive him to part with the Horn C. Twenty thousand dollars, however, would buy a lot of feed, save a lot of cattle. It would pull through a good many small ranchers. Most important of all, it might mean the difference between a thrifty range of independent cattlemen and the giant syndicate Blake Ludlow secretly represented.

Ben paused on the brow of a bleak, jutting hill. Far down along a curving, dry stream bed he could see the neat frame buildings of the Horn C. The towering poplars about the buildings were bending in the wind. Those were the trees he'd climbed as a carefree boy. The windmill was running riot, and he could see the corrals where he'd tamed many a frisky mustang.

The sight brought a stinging blur to Ben's eyes. He turned away, with a heavy feeling of despair.

Joel Floud's ramshackle cabin nestled in a rocky hollow. He ran a few head of cattle, but made most of his money by shrewd speculation in old people's misfortunes.

At Ben's hail the miser came to the door. He was a toothless

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oldster, with purple beak and shaggy white mane.

"Come to close the deal, did ye?" he demanded in a cracked voice. "Well, come in and thaw out."

"Twenty thousand?" Ben asked, thrusting his hands above the inadequate blaze in the fireplace.

The miser's faded eyes showed a crafty gleam. "A week ago, yes. But the cows is skinnier now and the price o' feed hez jumped. Eighteen thousand cash money today. Best I can do."

Ben knew the man well enough to realize he wouldn't get any place quibbling with him. Shrewdly, Floud had sensed his plight and was quick to take advantage of it. Ben took papers from his inside coat pocket and forced himself to speak briskly. "O. K. Fish 'er out, Floud."

The old money hoarder left the room. In a few minutes he came back clutching a roll of musty greenbacks, old money that had been hidden away for many years. Miser Floud never trusted a bank.

"There she be," he cackled.

Ben counted the bills, put them away, and signed over the title to the Horn C. Quietly, he put on his gloves and left the miser chuckling.

RETURNING to Redfox, Ben went straight to the bank. His shoulders were thrust back and there was new energy in his step. If the weather broke soon, he might yet be able to hold the prairie for the men who had pioneered it.

Stepping inside the building, he let his gaze wander to his desk. His eyes bulged at the sight of a slim, well-dressed young fellow sitting there, puffing nervously on a cigarette. Then Ben was rushing for-

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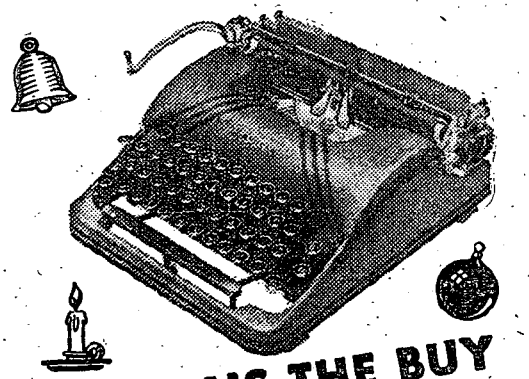

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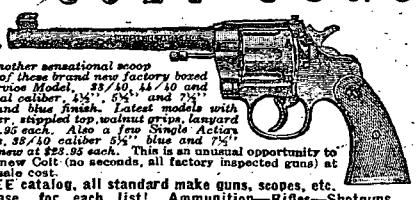

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ward, a glad smile lightening the sobriety of his face.

"Andy, you young hellion!"

Sleek, well-groomed Andy Conifer couldn't quite suppress a quick grin. But it faded almost immediately.

"Better brace yourself for some bad news, old maverick," he said, his voice studiedly casual.

Ben planted his fists on his lean hips. "Broke again, huh? Now, listen here, Andy—"

His brother held up a slim, tapered hand. "It's worse this time, Ben. My I O U's are out for sixteen thousand bones. I've got to dig it up by morning or that lousy bunch in Lakesburg will rub me out. I'm not fooling, either."

Ben's eyebrows drew down to a flat line. His voice was icy. "You've come to the wrong place, Andy. We're fightin' our guts out to keep Battleground Prairie still on the map. You'll have to get out of your own jam this time."

Andy got up, shrugging philosophically. "O. K., Ben. But don't blame me for askin' you. I'm only tryin' to save my neck."

Ben's face changed. "Is it that bad, Andy?"

Andy smiled. "It is. But I'm not beggin', savvy. I got to lose my neck sometime. Maybe the sooner the better."

Ben thought of the Horn C and of his father. The wad of currency was pressing against his side and he thought of how much it would mean to him and his neighbors. But those thoughts seemed to melt away as he looked at his brother. Always happy-go-lucky, taking the downs with the ups, a gambler to the core, but a fine, straight-shooting lad at heart, Andy Conifer would go to his death, without complaining, a smile on his lips. One movement of Ben's hand could prevent it. And, abruptly, he made that movement. He slapped down the thick sheaf of

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bank notes on the desk.

His voice was dry, husky. "Here's your dough, Andy, and a couple of thousand for a stake."

When Andy had left, Ben walked to the back windows and stared out across the wind-swept plains like a man in a dream. He had given away his last trump. Maybe it was a crazy thing to do, crazy as hell. But a man's life was at stake, and he couldn't find it in his heart to blame himself.

ON the morning of the third day after the sale of the Horn C, four men filed into the bank. Ben Conifer watched them approach, sensed trouble in the offing.

Link Ames led the group, his lean, brown face a stubborn mask. After him came long-geared Jim Savage, grizzled old River Bill Cristy, and the wizened Latigo Longstreet. Like Ames, they were all small cowmen, badly hit by the weather.

Ames came to the point bluntly. "We heard you sold the Horn C, Conifer. You can't turn us down on loans now."

Deep lines etched the banker's face, as if cut there by bitter acid. "The situation is unchanged," he said quietly.

The four ranchers looked at each other grimly. Jim Savage laid a brawny hand on his gun belt.

"It wouldn't hurt you to spare us a couple thousand apiece, would it, Conifer?" he rumbled ominously. "Ludlow said he paid you fifty thousand cash for the Horn C."

Ben leaped up, his eyes flashing dagger points. "Ludlow's a lying crook! It's time you crazy fools woke up and seen what he's trying to do. He wants to break this bank. He's got four times as much money behind him as the bank ever had in it. If you could see around his slimy tongue, you'd know he's out to gobble the whole prairie. Sure, I sold the Horn C. I sold it for eighteen thousand. And I didn't sell it to Blake Ludlow."

Jim Savage looked around uncertainly but Ames shoved him aside. "I think you're lying, Conifer. Looks to me like you're hoarding your dough, figuring to break this range and hog it yourself. You're sore at Ludlow because he whipped you. If you can prove anything on him, we'll believe you. We know he owns the Horn C. He showed us the deed."

Ben sat down suddenly. He knew, now, that he'd fallen into Ludlow's trap. The land agent wanted the Horn C. It was one ranch that might be hard to get, later. He'd inviegled Joel Floud into buying the spread for him. Floud must have made a nice piece of change by the transaction, but Ludlow got the Horn C plenty cheap.

"Well," Ames prompted, "do we get a loan?"

Ben shook his head. He couldn't tell them he'd given the money to a gambler. "No, you don't get it," he said tonelessly. "There isn't any to give you."

Cursing, tall Jim Savage tugged at his gun. River Bill Cristy scrambled aside. Little Latigo, his face black as a thundercloud, shoved a hand under his ragged Mackinaw.

Unafraid, Ben Conifer watched them, a queer smile twisting a gray gash across his face. He saw Link Ames move like a cat, shoving down Savage's gun wrist.

"Cut that stuff, Jim!" Ames snapped. "He ain't heeled. And even if he don't act like it, he's still a human being."

"Domned ef I don't 'ave me do'ots," muttered River Bill, as they shuffled toward the door.

The banker watched them ride out

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of town, their faces bleak, dogged, without hope.

THE morning wore away. Al Parker went to lunch and came back. At two o'clock Ben hadn't moved from his desk.

"You sick?" the cashier inquired.

Ben shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

He pulled open a drawer, took a Colt .38 from it and laid it on the desk in front of him. Where his fingers had touched the gun, darker spots broke the gray dust film. Here was the way to handle Blake Ludlow. He'd call Ludlow out in the street where everyone could see it was a fair fight. Simple. Brief. All over in a minute.

Yet the banker didn't move. He stared at the gun, and in it he saw injustice, cruelty, barbarism. Gun law. A thing he had fought against as long as he could remember.

Tension tightened the lines of his forehead. His throat felt stiff and dry. With a sudden effort he shrugged his shoulders. As if drawn by a magnet, his hand reached out and closed around the gunstock. He had tossed everything he owned into the pot. Why should he let a matter of principle hold him back now? It was the way of the West, this land of flaming guns. Maybe it was the right way. Maybe he had been wrong all these years.

He looked out of the window, but he saw only a vague blur. His eyes were fixed, thoughtful, as if they were looking a long way ahead.

The thrum of hoofs rose above the wind's moaning, but it wasn't until the sound stopped in front of the bank that Ben Conifer was aware of it. Like a man awakening from a nightmare, he looked down at the gun in his hand, smiled wryly, and dropped it back into the drawer.

He looked up as the door swung inward, and surprise nearly knocked him out of his chair. Andy Conifer rushed in, a jubilant grin on his face. He waved a thick roll of greenbacks.

"Here's your chicken feed—with a couple thousand for interest," he announced exultantly. "The cards sizzled last night."

Speechless with amazement, Ben stared at the money, then at the beaming face of his brother.

"Push them peepers back in your head before somebody knocks 'em off with a board," Andy joshed. "Old Lady Luck can scramble the eggs most any way she wants. Any tinhorn finds that out."

As soon as Andy departed, Ben handed the roll of greenbacks to Al Parker. "Stick this in the vault, Al," he told the cashier. "I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Whistling a little tune, Ben forked his horse and hit the open prairie. He was thinking, "I'll tell Link Ames, Savage, Longstreet, and River Bill Cristy to mosey in and grab what they need of that twenty thousand. And there'll be plenty left over for the others. The Battleground ain't busted yet. Not by a long shot!"

Wrapped in his thoughts, he rode along for several miles. Suddenly, then, he became aware of an uncanny change in the weather. The wind was lulled to an ominous whisper, lending a false warmth to the atmosphere. Dull gray clouds, zooming out of the northwest, fanned across the sky to blot out the sun. Ben's eyes narrowed as he watched the sky. He pulled up his horse and saw that the gray was whitening. Snow!

Regretfully, Ben turned his horse back toward Redfox. A blizzard was brewing, if he knew the signs. It was no time for him to be riding the range. Besides, the cowmen couldn't move feed from the railroad until the

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storm was past. Disappointed though he was, Ben knew one energizing thought. Snow would thaw the ground. Grass would grow beneath it. And when it melted, the long famine would be broken. Victory was in sight.

Ben was crossing the railroad tracks at the edge of town when he first sighted the huddle of men in front of the bank. Something was haywire. His brows flattened to a straight line, and he speeded his bronc. One of the men saw him and yelled something about "robbery."

IT was enough. Ben Conifer's muscles seemed to turn to ice. Robbed! The knockout punch. The final stroke that would finish him, smash the bank, and throw Battleground Prairie open to the land-grabbing vultures. He recalled what Andy had said about Old Lady Luck, and a bitter, ironic smile twisted his pale lips.

Sliding off his horse, Ben pushed through the throng. "Where's Al?" he demanded.

"Al's dead," a potbellied barber told him. "Three masked men did the job. A posse is hot on their trail."

A sinking feeling inside him, Ben walked into the bank. A posse would be licked before it started, with a blizzard in the making.

Behind the high ironwork of his cage, the grizzled old cashier lay face down in a pool of blood. The thick vault door hung open. All of the cash, including the roll Andy had brought, was missing. Several months before, Ben had dropped theft insurance to cut down expenses. Now he cursed himself for a fool.

Two men carried out Al Parker. When the crowd was gone, Ben locked up the bank and went across the street.

The churning turmoil inside of him had settled to a cold calmness. He was broke. So were the cattlemen. Ludlow had won. It was only a matter of time until the ranchers were forced to sell at Ludlow's price.

Scattered flakes of snow were fluttering down as Ben Conifer went up the walk and turned in at Ludlow's office.

The land agent was slouched in an easy-chair, reading a city newspaper. He looked up, unable to conceal the gloating gleam in his heavy-lidded eyes. There was sympathy in his words, but his tone belied it.

"Sorry about your tough luck, Conifer."

Ben's eyes were frosty. "Congratulations, Ludlow. You and the moneybags behind you win."

There was polite surprise on Ludlow's face. "What do you mean? I win what?"

Ben waved the question away. "Where are your three cronies?"

Ludlow grunted. "They rode over to Lakesburg today to contact some buyers. Reckon they'll be trapped in this blasted snow."

Ben's eyes narrowed. It seemed strange that Gandil and Struce and

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Beck should be gone the day three masked men robbed the bank. On an impulse he could hardly have explained to himself, he sat down in a rawhide-bottom chair.

"I reckon I'll help you wait for 'em," he announced.

Blake Ludlow scowled but said nothing. When an hour had ticked past, he began to fidget, nervously shifting his huge bulk in his chair.

Ben watched him covertly. His first suspicion was gaining ground.

Ludlow got up and looked out the window. "Snowin' to beat the band. Reckon the boys ain't comin' back today. I'm goin' home while I can still get there."

They both stalked outside. The world was a maze of swirling white. Ben turned in at the nearest saloon, while Ludlow went on up the street.

Inside the saloon, Ben went into the back room and sat down near the window. Another hour slipped by. Then he saw a big-framed man, indistinct in the dusk, slinking through the deepening snow toward the rear door of the Ajax Land Co.'s office. It was Blake Ludlow returning!

PINCHING out his cigarette, Ben quietly left the saloon and went home. He buckled on his gun belt, loaded the revolver, and slipped it in his holster. This time there was no doubt in his mind about his course of action. He was certain that Ludlow's finger was deep in this robbery and murder.

The rising wind approached blizzard force when Ben plowed through the alleyway. In the shed back of Ludlow's office, three blanketed horses munched hay. They hadn't been there before and seeing them, Ben's mouth tightened.

He didn't bother to try the office doorknob but, bunching his muscles, drove his shoulder against the panel. The wood was thin and flimsy. It splintered under his drive. The door swung on its hinges and Ben sprang inside.

In the darkened room four men were humped over a round table stacked with gold, silver and bank notes. They whirled in one motion, and Blake Ludlow's curse shook the room. The other three stiffened in their chairs, hands poised above their holstered guns.

Ben pinned the door shut with his heel. He knew he'd never get out of that room under his own power. But he'd play his hand through to the finish.

"You worked it slick as any snake, Ludlow," he said bleakly. "The posse is out somewhere wallowing through the drifts. And here you squat across the street from the bank splitting the loot."

Ludlow glowered. "Mow him!" he growled to his three hardcases.

Hands blurred, then seemed to freeze in mid-air. Something thudded against the door, smashing it inward. Hurled off balance, Ben reeled halfway across the room. His head snapped about, and he saw the snow-crusted figure of Joel Floud outlined against the swirling white dusk. The miser's face was purple, and a gun glittered in his gnarled fist.

His voice was a swollen croak of rage. "Ye robbed me, domn yer smellin' hides. Ye can't lie out of it. Ye'll come acrost, or I'll—"

"What the devil!" Ludlow roared. "What you mean, we robbed you?"

"Twenny-five thousand dollars! A fortune! The money ye paid me fer the Horn C. One of ye must hev snuck back and watched where I cached it. I seen 'em today—Gandil and Beck and Struce. I seen 'em leave my place. I wuz out bunchin' cows before the snow. They didn't

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see me. I was behind the bushes. When I looked, my money was gone. Ye robbed me, ye skonks!"

Ludlow stabbed a baleful glare at his henchmen. "What about it, you double-crossers? Who told you to lift that dinero?"

Nick Gandil squirmed. "Hell, boss, it was a soft touch. Lemme plug the old crowbait. He's no more good to—"

Ben saw the miser's gun hand stiffen, the rage in his bloodshot eyes intensify. Thundering a curse, Ludlow kicked over the table as he sprang to his feet.

Floud's gun boomed twice. Gandil slumped down, clutching at his belly. Beck spun halfway around, hooking a chair for support. Then another gun crashed, and the miser went down, his life a forfeit to his greed.

BEN had drawn his gun at the first report. Struce had never taken his pig eyes off him. Now the hard-case's gun was blazing. Ben felt the slap of lead against his ribs, knocking him away from another slug.

Squeezing the trigger desperately, he felt the gun leap in his fist. Struce grunted like a hog, dropped his weapon and fell flat on his face. The slender banker's gun stuttered twice more, as breathtaking pain lanced his body. He saw Beck wilt down behind the overturned table.

Now only Blake Ludlow's huge hulk remained in front of Ben.

Propped against the wall, weak and dizzy from the slash of bullets, Ben Conifer gripped his .38 with both hands and poured a stream of lead into the big man's burly chest. Vaguely, he wondered if he was hitting his mark. His bullets seemed to

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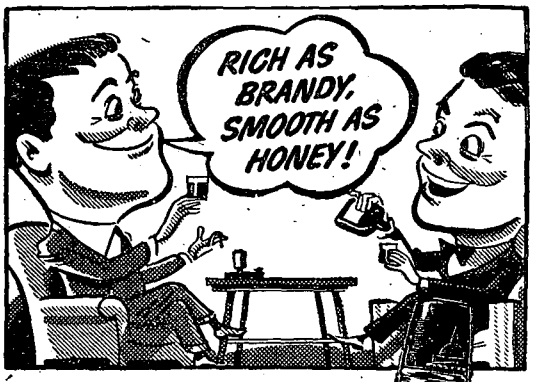

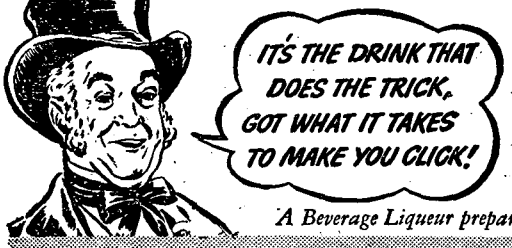

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have no effect on that hulking figure. Then the .38 hammer clicked on an empty cylinder.

Suddenly Ludlow's pistol dropped as if it were too heavy for him to hold up any longer. His final bullet pried a foot-long splinter from the floor.

The land agent wobbled like a drunken man. "You . . . you got me," he gasped, as though his mind couldn't grasp the fact. Abruptly, he pitched across Nick Gandil's legs and lay still.

The room spun crazily before Ben Conifer's eyes. He kept thinking it was funny that he, a scrawny runt who hated guns and gun toters, was the only one standing. Then, abruptly, the room turned black and he slipped to the floor.

When he opened his eyes again, the room was full of people. Hard-boiled Doc Dempsey's expert fingers were exploring his wounds.

The medico turned around and spoke: "Shot plumb full of holes. But I'll set 'em up for the whole town if he kicks the bucket. I reckon he's good for quite a spell yet."

Ben tried to grin. Then he saw Link Ames in the crowd. Ames pushed through to his side and said shamefacedly, "You had the right brand on Ludlow, Ben. Every cent he lifted from your bank was scattered all over the floor."

"Tell the boys to come in tomorrow," Ben whispered. "I've got twenty thousand that's been busy savin' a man's life. Now it's ready to go to work saving cattle."

Men moved away from the door and Ben could see that the snow was slackening. Spring would come, and wild flowers would again splash a lush grassland with a mad riot of color. He felt deep thankfulness that he would be here to see it, and so would all the other men and women who belonged on Battleground Prairie.

THE END.

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With the first lunge Ken knew he was a goner—Bull Brisco had tricked him with that single-fire rig!

The rodeo code was ride to the whistle or get thrown, but Ken Brady was bucking more than killer horses—the arena was hock deep in treachery.

BRONCBUSTER'S LUCK

BY ROLLAND LYNCH

THE dust in the rodeo arena had settled. The Wyoming sun hung low. A knot of men, the judges, were huddled on the platform there between the bucking horse and wild steer chutes. The announcer, megaphone trailing in his hand, kept walking around the group and peering over their shoulders as they tallied the points. The stands sat white and tense. They were recovering from the ride just finished.

The rider had left the chute on Gray Dynamite, lighting the fuse to that explosive bundle of sinew with high-raking spurs. And he never touched a bit of leather except with the seat of his pants. He had kept

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that glued to the saddle as he scratched the plunging animal from withers to flanks. It had been a magnificent exhibition. So reckless it had left the stands breathless and limp. And the way the rider lit down after the ten-second whistle and deliberately turned his back on the wild applause!

The announcer's voice bellowed through the megaphone: "The winner and new all-around champion—Ken Brady!"

The spectators stood again, their hands and throats sending thunderous waves of sound across the hoof-churned bowl. Broncbusters, steer riders and ropers pounded Ken on the back. Ken grinned a little, but something inside him kept his generous lips from expanding their fullest. He went to the judges' stand and got his prize money and turned quickly away. It took an hour for him to go down Lookout's main street to his hotel. Crowds kept stopping him, offering to buy drinks, congratulating him. Women blushed when he looked at them and cast their eyes down. Some stared boldly, but he paid them no heed. More bruised from the back-slapping than from his ride, Ken made the lobby of the Laramie House.

Patrick Matson came out of his chair and met Ken just inside the door. He was a big man, with iron-gray hair. "My mind's made up, Ken. Partners, you and I," he said. "You've designed the best bucking rig in the business. Pendleton doesn't make an Association saddle that's any better or conforms more closely to the rules."

"Thanks," said Ken quietly. "I've looked forward to this for some time. When do we start?"

Matson worried his sun-blistered nose with his thumb. "We can't be ready for about two weeks. I want you to go to the show at Medicine Bow. It's the most important one in the State. It won't hurt the sales of the saddles if you win again."

But it wasn't just winning for the sake of saddle sales that was behind Matson's words, and Ken knew it. There was something else in Medicine Bow Matson wanted him to beat before they started this saddlery together. It was a piece of Ken's life that had been left undone. Matson had to find out if Ken could take it before investing his money in the youngster.

Ken nodded. "I'll see you in Medicine Bow," he said, and went up the stairs to his room.

As Ken took the steps slowly, things welled up from years long gone. The acrid smell of dust rising under pounding hoofs. The cries of the stands and the picturesque swearing of rodeo hostlers as they harried fresh outlaw horses into the chutes. The glistening beauty of Blacksnake, that writhing bundle of steel that shot off at all angles like an unpredictable Roman candle. That day the Big Horn Kid had been up—champion of champions. He had missed the bulge of a shoulder muscle. As clearly as if it had happened today, Ken could see it. That huddled, twisted form in the dirt; the hoofs upraised like sledges. Then the sickening sound of breaking bones.

Ken had been in the little tent behind the bucking-horse pen with the Big Horn Kid as the applause rolled out for the new champion. Through lips bloodless from pain, the Kid mumbled: "Broncbuster's luck, son. It trails everyone that follows the shows. You either ride to the whistle or you get throwed. Remember one thing—don't take it too seriously when you win, and you won't have to when you lose."

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Ken was thinking of those words as he turned into his room and got out of his sweaty clothes. They'd fit when he returned to Medicine Bow. The mirror over the wash-basin showed him a rock-ribbed torso topped by a face dyed mahogany by sun and wind. Most of that muscle had been developed behind a plow. He had had a hard row to hoe to get where he was. He had suffered a lot to make it, but he was there now. He didn't take it too seriously as he bathed and put on fresh clothes. He was thinking about Medicine Bow.

AS Ken pulled up on the rise and looked down on the town there on the south bank of the Medicine Bow River, nostalgia held him. The mountains behind the town were barren under the summer heat, but he saw them as he had first seen them —snow-covered, the rocky scarps like ivory teeth snarling up at the heavens. There had been a girl then. She was gone now, but another face still remained. The flat features of it stirred Ken a little.

He was in the Shoshone Bar when he saw him. Bull Brisco came in with some town cronies. They were laughing and talking, and had plainly visited other saloons before this one. Bull hadn't changed. Broad-shouldered, thick-necked, he had a booming voice that immediately singled Ken out.

"It's the champ, boys. Ken Brady! How's the rutabagas growing, kid?"

Ken felt his face grow hot as patrons turned and stared at him. Bull Brisco was the same. Noisy, careless of everyone's feelings but his own. He came up with his men and they fanned out about Ken, grinning.

"I was lucky," said Ken. He couldn't think of some of the things he had planned to say. Bull was

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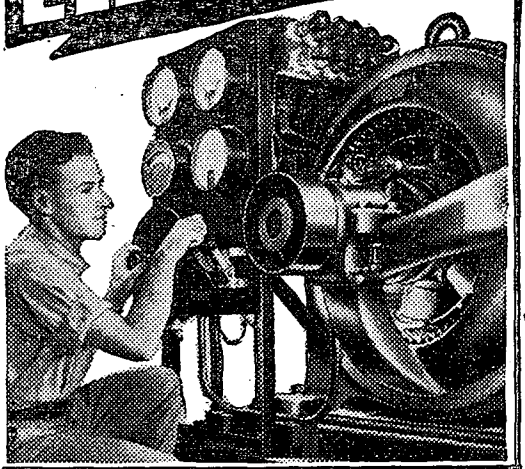

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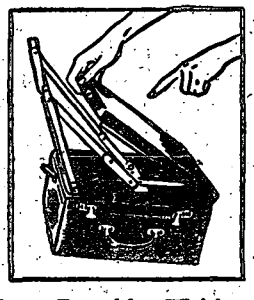

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laughing at him, had everybody laughing at him, and Ken could think of no way to stop it.

"Luck?" echoed Bull. "Why, the way you build a saddle would keep a dottering old man on the back of the worst horse alive!"

Ken shrank a little as laughter swept through the saloon. Bull was a saddle maker, and these patrons were cattlemen. They never missed a chance to rub it into a man who had been the son of a nester.

Bull went on: "I got an order for ten rigs, Brady. I'll give you a dollar a tree to do the stitching on 'em." He threw back his dark curly head and laughed at the ceiling. Everyone else hoorawed, too. It was funny, Wyomin's rodeo champion, who was famous for his special-designed saddles, being offered a job stitching leather at a ridiculous price.

"I don't need the money," said Ken. It was all he could think of saying. He wanted to swing a fist into that grinning face, but he was a nester's son among cowmen. Before he could think it all out the moment was gone as Bull waved to his men.

"C'mon," he said. "This place smells of rutabagas." He swaggered out.

Ken downed his drink in a gulp, looking at himself in the bar mirror. He was showing his anger and hurt. Tugging his hat brim down and hanging his head, he left the saloon. As he went down the street, he abstractedly saw the bunting and posters bearing his name and telling the date of the coming show. On one of the twelve sheets bearing his likeness someone had drawn with a pencil a ridiculously long mustache beneath his nose. Ken turned into his hotel and went to his room. He threw himself onto the bed.

Things had been just like this years and years ago. Ken had been

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a nester's son from straw hat to ankle-high brogans then. But his love wasn't in the rows of tilled soil; it was in saddles and the fine artistry of designing them. Every chance he had, Ken went to neighboring ranches and watched the rough strings being topped by itinerant broncbusters. He sought their company in town and asked questions about their kaks. A small Medicine Bow leather worker did some saddle making, and Ken helped to stitch and tool some of the rigs—anything to learn the mechanics of this craft he loved. Gradually he learned he had to be with horses and the men who rode them to gain his end.

Ken was small and freckled and gangly the day he had horned into a cowman's barbecue. A girl had smiled at him and talked with him, and a strange warmth had run around inside of Ken. Bull Brisco and his cronies had found them beside the creek, tossing pebbles into the water, and stealing shy looks at one another.

"Lookit the clodhoppers on that nester's feet," Bull had pointed out. "He's got a turnip for a head, too."

The boys all laughed, for Bull was the son of a big saddle maker in Medicine Bow. Some men coming up to slake their thirst had laughed, too. Shamefacedly, the girl had giggled. Aflame with tingling blood, Ken had run, hearing the laughter getting louder and louder behind him.

His father had found him out in the barn, face down in the hay, cheeks tear-wet. He had pulled the boy to his feet, and then stared off into space after hearing the story. Finally, he said: "You've got to take what comes along, son. Poor folks all have a hard time of it—nester or squatter. But don't let the brand of a name stop you from what you want to be. You just close your ears and work along. You try hard enough and you'll get what you want."

That sounded right to Ken until the first day of the Medicine Bow Rodeo and Barbecue. He had run into Bull Brisco in back of the bucking pen. Ken was in overalls, and Bull was in fancy chaps and boots and sombrero. Bull was bigger, but Ken figured if you tried hard enough you got what you wanted. He wanted to whip the smugness out of this saddle maker's son.

Ken tried as hard as he could. He kept picking himself out of the dust and rushing in again. He closed his ears to the names the onlookers called him. When it was all over, and he couldn't get up again, he lay weakly against the corral post and watched them walk away.

His lips were thin when he explained to his father that night. He said: "I did what you said. I closed my ears and tried as hard as I could, but I didn't do what I wanted to."

His father nodded. "No man wins until after he first loses, son. When things are easy to beat, they're worthless to have. You'll find you have to keep tackling the hard things over and over before you whip 'em."

Ken packed his things the next day and started out. He soaped up his saddle, the Association rig he had fashioned himself, and cinched it down on the pony his father had bought him. He shook hands with his dad and turned northward. He had things thought out. If you want to be known as a saddle maker, go where rigs are the main topic of conversation.

He made a name for himself up around the Oregon Wild Horse

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Heaven country. Over in the Montana Bitterroots, too. Horsemen all looked at his work and said it must be good, or he couldn't be a top rider. He won the rodeo at Haverty, and wrote his father. He got a letter from a neighbor, saying that six months ago the plow share had struck a rock and shoved the handle through old Bart's chest. If Ken ever came back home, he'd find the grave by the cottonwoods with a little wooden cross over it.

Ken stayed with the shows then, following them, winning, placing or showing—and making a saddle here and there. He met Patrick Matson and Patrick became interested in starting up a saddlery. Now Ken had won the Lookout show, and was all-around State champion. He had tried hard, as his father had counseled. And he wasn't taking it too seriously, as the Big Horn Kid had warned.

HE got up off the bed as Patrick Matson came into the room. Matson pulled out a big cigar and said perfunctorily: "I see you got here. Show opens tomorrow, maybe you ought to make the rounds of the town and talk saddles with the boys. I broke the news that buckin' saddles aren't all we'll make. That regular range tree of yours is a mighty beautiful kak to sit, too."

Matson was really sending him out against Bull Brisco, Ken knew. It was Bull who would show Patrick, one way or another, whether Ken would be a good partnership investment.

Ken grunted, refreshed himself by whooshing his face in the room's basin, and went down to the street. Over his meal at the restaurant, one of the punchers who followed the shows came up and said: "I want to place my order now, Ken. Association rig to conform with all regulations. I want a fourteen-inch swell and a five-inch cantle with very little dish. Me, I'm like a slat, so the seat's gotta be small."

Ken took the figures down and promised it the moment he got into production. Then he was going from bar to bar, talking saddles. How he glued his trees together and the way he thonged the rawhide on wet and let it dry for a glovelike fit. But it was abstract talk—he was wondering when Bull Brisco would show his colors. When he walked into the River Casino, his brows drew together. Bull stood at the far end of the bar with Patrick Matson, and Bull was drunk and talking loud.

"There never was a day a nester could make a saddle for a cowman," Bull was booming out. "If I was tied onto a horse like his rig ties you on, I could ride the orneriest critter made of hide and bones."

Everyone's eyes narrowed a little when they saw Ken.

Patrick Matson said: "Half of the

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men following the shows ride saddles Ken made personally. Yet he beats them."

"He's a nester shot with luck," swore Bull. "Once he gets his knees locked under that swell of his, dynamite wouldn't jerk him loose. He belongs behind a plow."

Ken strode the length of the bar and placed himself before Bull. "I can hear you better if you'll lower your voice," he said. "I'm sure everyone else in the saloon can, too."

"I been telling Matson, here, that you haven't the right to ride with cowfolks," Bull thundered. "Without that saddle of yours—"

"Maybe you think I couldn't beat you with one of your own?" said Ken coldly.

"Never. If you'd ride against me without that rockin'-chair you designed, I'd get you laughed back into homesteading."

"Any time you say. You use my saddle—I'll use yours."

"Tomorrow afternoon," said Bull loudly. "Special event of the show. A round robin. Three calf ties, three steer dogs, and three broncs—each man riding to judges' points."

"Suits me," Ken replied shortly.

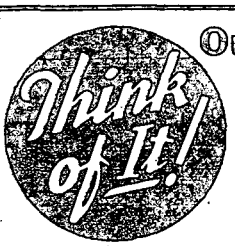
"For how much?"

"Name it."

"The loser to acknowledge the other saddle's the best, and a thousand dollars."

Ken nodded. "Tomorrow afternoon." He turned and went out of the saloon.

THE arena was packed. Dust beat up as riders fought for day prizes. A facsimile of Custer's last stand was staged by Indians. There were numerous races; a Pony Express run for cowgirls, and a men's relay affair. The gathering was enthusiastic, but it was holding plenty in reserve for the treat of the day.



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The special added attraction—the match between Bull Brisco and Ken Brady. Bull was the best rider around the Medicine Bow. He was considered the best saddle maker, too. Betting was heavy, with everything wagered, including shirts. Over in the Indian encampment a maiden was bet against four pinto ponies.

Ken Brady showed up at the judges' stand with his saddle over his arm. Old Hub Keown, shriveled and wizened hostler, was at his side to see personally to saddling his mounts. Ken handed his saddle over to Bull and took the one offered.

Hub started to swear. "That there's a single-fire rig, and Ken ain't never rid nothin' but a center—"

"It'll do," Ken interrupted evenly.

One of the judges leaned over the railing and said: "You'll tie calves first. The three times will be added together with the lowest man getting credit for five hundred points. One thousand will be a perfect score for each event. We'll deduct points for bad form. You ready?"

Ken nodded and walked toward the calf chute. Hub strode alongside, saying: "Snow him under, kid!"

The twisting, dodging calf shot from the pen and in a second Bull Brisco appeared. His horse came at a killing gallop. Bull carried his pigging strings in his mouth. His loop built and shot out and landed true. While his mount held the calf, Bull lit running and slapped the ties on its churning feet.

The announcer bawled: "Seven seconds." Applause rippled through the stands.

Ken mounted back in the pen and tested the saddle. This single-fire rig didn't feel natural. Bull had done this on purpose. He knew what Ken rode. With a shrug, Ken settled heavily into the leather, ab-

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sently fingering his pigging strings looped under his trousers' belt.

He got the signal and spurred forward. The calf was a bobbing, lunging bundle of brown before him. He built his loop and let fly. He missed! It was the anger in him, blurring his eyes and stiffening his muscles. He coiled quickly and cast again.

When he stood up from his tying, the announcer bawled: "Fourteen seconds!" The stands were silent.

Then came the rapid announcements: "Brisco—nine seconds."

"Brady—six seconds."

"Brisco—eight seconds."

"Brady—seven seconds."

The point score went up on the board:

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780			780
Brady	620			620

There were those who cheered wildly; those who groaned. The Indian maiden who had been wagered against the horses shrank back against her father's tepee, her dark eyes a little wide with fear.

Ken calmly inspected Hub's cinching up of the saddle on the fresh horse, as the steers were made ready. Hub hauled tight on the cinch and threw his hitch. He shot a stream of fine cut into the dust and said: "He took advantage of you, son, when he handed you this single-fire rig. It ain't gonna feel so good when you get to scratchin' 'em high."

"I'm getting used to it," said Ken tightly.

Then he was climbing up and taking the signal to leave the chute. He raced out parallel to the frightened steer. His eyes never left those needlelike horns as he drew alongside and let go of the reins. Then he had the snorting animal's horns, his heels were digging into the ground, and his teeth bared as he twisted and lay his weight against that corded neck. With a thud the steer went down.

Ken didn't watch Bull make his ride. He concentrated on his own. He was remembering his father's words: "Try hard enough and you'll get what you want." And remembering what the Big Horn Kid had said: "Don't take it too seriously."

When the scores were again posted a mighty roar went up from the stands.

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780	650		1430
Brady	620	810		1430

Over by the tepee, the Indian girl wet her rich lips.

KEN was grinning a little as he went to the bucking chute. The looseness was back in his shoulders and he regained the feel of things. That was all that mattered. He noticed, too, that those six grueling rides had tightened Bull's lips a little, and there were lines running away from the corners of his eyes. He spoke jerkily and harshly, showing that fatigue and anger had him. A man had to be in pretty good condition mentally and physically to stand this sort of pounding.

Ken and Hub Keown went to the corral and looked at the six horses that had been chosen for the rides. They were the top show horses of the rodeo. A man could look as good as his ability would allow, once he threw a leg over them. Ken rubbed the noses of the three he would ride. Out of habit, he stroked the mole-soft nostrils of the others. Old Hub did the same thing, lingering by Brisco's mounts as Ken went to the gate.

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Ken was first out on Madcap. He kept his spurs raking from neck to flank, and kept waving his big hat. His britches stayed glued to the foreign saddle, and when the pick-up men helped him down after the ten-second whistle had blown, he bowed stiffly to the roar of acclaim.

From the top rail of the bucking chute, he watched Bull Brisco on Stormcloud. Bull couldn't handle the animal at all, despite Ken's saddle. The horse put on a great show of frenzy, and Brisco fought all the way to stay in the leather. When he lit down and came walking back, his thick lips were thin lines, and he was shaking with anger.

Old Hub Keown chuckled at Ken's elbow. "He's fightin' within himself, son. He's gone."

"Quiet," said Ken brusquely.

On the next two rides, Ken gave the judges and stands as good a show as they'd ever seen. He showed his complete mastery of the plunging animals he sat. Even those who had bet against him grudgingly joined in the tribute. The Indian girl smiled wanly.

Brisco fought himself out of the picture. His rannicky animals were just too much for him. They seemed like they were mad and frightened and he couldn't do a thing with them. He quit before the whistle on the last ride, and angrily slapped at his horse with his hat. The score board showed the results:

	Calf Pts.	Steer Pts.	Bronc Pts.	Total
Brisco	780	650	500	1930
Brady	620	810	1000	2430

Bull planted himself in front of Ken and croaked hoarsely: "Shot with luck." That was all he said, then he turned away.

KEN avoided the main street as he returned to town. He went to his hotel and cleaned up. As he looked into the mirror to comb his hair, he saw the faint signs of triumph etched on his face. He stood still and battled that expression until it was gone. Then he jammed on his hat and sought out Patrick Matson. Patrick was at the far end of the River Casino bar. His face was set and hard, and his greeting gruff and strained.

Ken was puzzled, but only for a moment. A roar was shearing the saloon as Bull Brisco came through the swinging doors with several men, two of them rodeo judges. "A yellow nester would do anything," he was bellowing. "Brady, you're the worst tinhorn that ever came out of a rutabaga patch."

Ken swung slowly, his eyes clouding and fists balling. This time he would take Brisco apart with his hands.

Bull strode up, his florid face working, and shoved a fist beneath Ken's nose. "Ever smell that before?" he demanded.

Ken caught Patrick Matson's ex-

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pression out of the corner of his eye. The oldster was staring oddly at him. "Cougar fat," said Ken.

"You're damn right it is!" Bull's voice had an insane pitch. "You rubbed it on the noses of my bucking horses, and they damn near went crazy with fear. It's a nester trick, Brady, the only way you can beat a real rider without that saddle of yours!"

Ken's shoulders settled as he put up a hand to silence Bull. There should be something to say, but this man before him always robbed him of speech. Ken could see it all now. Old Hub Keown had rubbed that grease on the nostrils of Bull's mounts; had done it after Ken had stroked them there in the bucking pen. The smell of cougar almost drove a horse to killing frenzy. Old Hub had figured Bull had taken advantage of Ken by giving him that single-fire rig. He couldn't tell them Hub had done it. They wouldn't believe it.

Ken fished into his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills. He counted out a thousand dollars. "The bet," he said tersely. "That's a fine saddle you make, Brisco." He turned out of the saloon then amid the hush.

In the darkness of his hotel room, Ken sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands. His dreams of partnership in saddlery with Patrick Matson were gone. But they couldn't take the skill out of his hands, no matter what else they took away from him. Yet, he knew that was not true. It was gone. This tale would spread, and the boys following the shows wouldn't be caught dead on one of his Association rigs. He was right back where he started—a nester. Plows and seeds and dawn-until-dark labor. No more swinging chute gates, the acrid smell of dust welling from beneath a

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plunging outlaw's hoofs, the swelling roar of spectators at a daring ride well done, the arguments pro and con about the merits of his special designs for saddles.

It was nearly midnight when he stirred himself and rolled his pack. With it under his arm, he kept to the shadows as he went down the street to the corral for his horse.

As he turned into the black void of the barn, a figure moved out to meet him. Patrick Matson said: "I figured you wouldn't leave without your mount."

Ken didn't say anything, just stood there holding to his worldly belongings.

Patrick's hand fell on the youngster's shoulder. "I couldn't believe it," he said, "even when you didn't deny it. I found Hub Keown and had a talk with him. Everything got straightened out, kid, after Hub talked. The judges are satisfied. They ruled that you would have won even if Bull had ridden well. They awarded you the match, but called off the bet between you. I got your thousand dollars back and a written testimonial from Bull that your saddles are best. You want to start for Silver City this time of the night to begin getting the shop in shape, or do you want to wait until tomorrow morning?"

Ken's throat was dry, but he managed to say: "If it's all the same to you, I'll leave tonight."

"All right, son," said Matson. "I'll wire power of attorney to you, and you do whatever you need to do to get into production. Hub Keown will show up in a few days to go to work."

Ken moved into the darkness, saying over his shoulder: "Hub's a good man. He knows as much about my designs as I do."

THE END.

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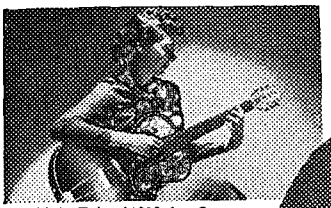

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